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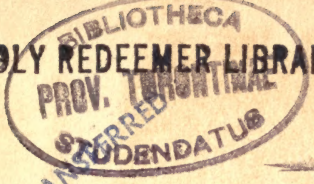

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MEDITATIONS

FOR THE USE OF

SEMINARIANS AND PRIESTS

BY

Very Rev. L. BRANCHEREAU, S. S.

UNIVERSITY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE TORONTO LIBRARY

Translated and adapted

C.SS.R. TRANSFERRED NOVITIATE

Volume I

THE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

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FOREWORD

On the Necessity of Meditation from the Exhortation of Pius X to the Catholic Clergy

Sanctity alone makes us what our divine vocation requires us to be—men whose thoughts are fixed only on heavenly things and who strive by all means to lead others thither.

Since, as all are aware, sanctity of life is the fruit of our will, only in as far as our will is strengthened by the help of divine grace, God Himself makes abundant provision that we may never, if we so wish, be destitute of grace; and this we acquire chiefly by the practice of prayer. Truly between prayer and sanctity the connection is so close that one cannot exist without the other.

Christ Himself brings these truths home to us by His frequent exhortations, and most of all by His example. He was wont to retire into desert places or to go up in the mountains alone; He used to spend whole nights in prayer; He frequently went into the temple; nay, even when the crowds pressed around Him, He used to pray openly with his eyes raised to heaven;

and at the end, when nailed to the cross, amid the pains of death, He implored the Father with a loud cry and with tears. *Let us therefore hold this as absolutely certain that a priest, to maintain worthily his dignity and his office, must be devoted in a singular manner to the practice of prayer.* . . . . For to the soul that is desirous of its own sanctity as well as of the salvation of others, how many occasions are given every day for turning to God! Inward troubles, the strength and obstinacy of temptations, lack of virtues, remissness in labor and the sterility of it, frequent offences and negligences, the fear of the divine judgments—all these are powerful incentives to us to weep before the Lord. . . . .

On this head it is of the first importance that a certain time should be alloted every day for meditation on the things of eternity. No priest can omit this without being guilty of serious negligence and to the detriment of his soul. . . . .

It is apparent, then, that there exists a great and urgent necessity to return to the daily contemplation of eternal things that the mind and the will, deriving fresh strength therefrom, may be fortified against all allurements.

Moreover, it behoves a priest to be possessed of a certain facility of rising to and dwelling on

heavenly things; for it is his duty to relish, to declare, to persuade heavenly things, and so to order his life above human affairs that whatever he does in the fulfilment of his sacred office he may do it according to God under the instinct and the guidance of faith. Now this habit of mind and this, as it were, native union with God are chiefly produced and protected by a practice of daily meditation—a truth which must be so plain to every thoughtful man that it is unnecessary to dwell longer on it.

A confirmation, albeit a painful one, of all this is to be found in the lives of those priests who think little of meditation on divine things or really dislike it. For they are men in whom the sense of Christ, that most estimable gift, languishes; entirely occupied with earthly things, following vanity, babbling of trifles, performing their sacred duties negligently, coldly, perhaps even unworthily. . . . .

Among those who are loath or who neglect "to consider in their hearts"[1] there are some who do not hide their consequent poverty of soul, but rather excuse it on the plea that they are entirely given up to the bustle of ministerial life for the manifold utility of others. But they are miserably deluded. For when

[1] JER. 12[11]

priests, not accustomed to converse with God, speak of him to others or give counsel on the Christian life, they are utterly destitute of the divine impulse and their preaching of the Gospel seems to be, as it were, half dead. Their voice . . . . bears no resemblance to the voice of the Good Shepherd which the sheep listen to for their salvation. . . . .

For all of you, beloved sons, let this exhortation of Ours, which is that of Christ the Lord, take deep root. "Take ye heed, watch and pray.[1]" But especially in the practice of pious meditation let the efforts of all be engaged, let the soul win confidence from frequent repetition of the words: "Lord, teach us how to pray."[2] . . . .

St. Charles in one of his pastorals dwells on this in a manner worthy of being remembered: "Understand, brethren, that nothing is so necessary for all ecclesiastics as mental prayer, preceding, accompanying, and following all our actions."

Hence it is that the Church rightly commands us to repeat frequently those words of David: "Blessed is the man who meditates on the law of the Lord; his will shall remain by

[1] MARK 13[33]
[2] LUKE 11[1]

night and by day; all things that he shall do shall prosper." Finally there remains one noble incentive with all the others. For if the priest is called another Christ, and is so by reason of the communication of authority, should he not entirely become so, and be held such, also by reason of his imitation of the actions of Christ? . . . . "Let our chief care, therefore, be to meditate on the life of Christ."

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This work, as its title indicates, is intended principally for the clergy. In this series of meditations, which has been prepared especially for priests and seminarians and ought, therefore, to prove suitable to their needs, they will find an exposition of the rules and the fundamental principles of Christian perfection and the great duties of sacerdotal life. We do not wish to depreciate the numerous books of meditations for ecclesiastics now in use; on the contrary, we sincerely desire to acknowledge their merit and value. They are the work of pious priests and contain a rich treasury of good and holy thoughts well adapted to develop piety and to facilitate the practice of mental prayer. Without pretending to supplant these, we have, like many others, thought that our work also might have its raison d'être and its usefulness.

These meditations were not originally prepared with a view to publication. They are

the meditations which for some years we have been giving to seminarians and sometimes also at priests' retreats. In preparing them for publication we have not altered them at all; this may explain how in different meditations the same thoughts are repeated though presented under a different aspect.

In the grouping of the meditations, should we follow exclusively the logical order or should we make them conform to the scholastic and liturgical year? We have combined both of these arrangements, each of which offers certain advantages and certain disadvantages. In the first three volumes dealing with the fundamental truths, the virtues, exercises of piety, and landmarks of the priestly life, we have followed the logical order of the subject matter. These meditations refer to no season in particular, so there was no reason for arranging them in chronological order. But the order of time was necessarily followed in the last three volumes as they contain meditations on the liturgical year, the mysteries of the Blessed Virgin, and the feasts of the saints.

It is well known that religious communities follow methods of mental prayer which differ notably in the acts prescribed though in all cases the end proposed is the same. Father Faber, in his work entitled *Growth in Holiness*

(chapter xv), sets forth the principal methods and gives an appreciation of them. We shall here take a rapid glance at the method on which the following meditations are based. It is the one given by Father Olier in his *Journée Chrétienne* and explained in detail in the *Manual of Piety for the use of seminarians*, and is used in all the seminaries under the direction of the Company of Saint Sulpice.

It is eminently dogmatic, being exclusively the development of the truth that all supernatural life consists in our union with Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate living in us by grace. The end of mental prayer is to make this union more intimate and complete and to make us act as perfectly as possible under the influence of the Holy Spirit of our Lord.

This end is attained by the following acts:

1. Just as we contemplate the sacred host and adore it in the hands of the priest before we receive sacramental communion, so in beginning prayer we place ourselves before Jesus Christ, the divine exemplar of all perfection, to contemplate and adore his dignity and grandeur, and to honor especially in him that virtue or mystery which is actually the object of our meditation. This is *Jesus before our eyes.*

2. But our Lord is not only our model of perfection, he is also its source and principle. Hence it follows that he has to come to us and we must live of him, in him, and by him. We will bring this about by a fervent petition. The second point of the meditation consists, therefore, in a petition the fruit of which, provided the necessary conditions be fulfilled, will be to bring about a communion with the life of the Word Incarnate and so draw *Jesus into our heart.*

But, that a true petition may ascend from our heart to God, three things are necessary: 1. that we highly esteem the grace we are going to ask; 2. that we feel its need keenly; 3. that we be convinced that God will grant us this grace if we ask it of him. Hence besides the three kinds of preparation, mental prayer consists of considerations to convince us of the importance of the grace desired, reflection to fill us with a consciousness of our need, and the renewal of our confidence in God, an essential condition of true prayer.

The direct object of the considerations in the meditation is not, as in some other methods, to make us take resolutions but to induce us to pray fervently that we may obtain from our Lord divine grace without which we can accomplish nothing.

3. By petition, we have drawn to ourselves the grace of Jesus Christ. To crown the work thus begun, we must correspond to this grace, abandon ourselves to it, taking generously whatever resolutions it may inspire in us. This is the coöperation by which, according to Father Olier, Jesus passes from our heart *into our hands,* i.e. into the external organs of action.

The meditation is concluded by what St. Francis de Sales calls the *spiritual bouquet.* This is a thought or short sentence which, being recalled from time to time during the day, will serve to revive in our soul the impressions and resolutions of the morning's meditation, which it briefly sums up.

Such is the method followed in these *Meditations.* We wish to remark, however, that in the typographical arrangement we have adopted, as Chenart did before us, a division which seems to depart a little from this method but does not substantially. As the considerations intended to produce conviction require greater development than the other parts, we have placed them by themselves. Under the title "acts and resolutions" we have grouped the reflections on our needs and other acts. This forms the third point of the meditation.

Mental prayer, inadequately called meditation, is at once an exercise of the mind and of the heart. If it were only an exercise of the intellect, it would be nothing more than speculative study. The end proposed is not to learn something but to act, that is to resolve to perfect our life by the practice of holy love. The pious acts emanating from the heart form, therefore, an essential part of mental prayer.

But it is also necessary for the mind to receive light and for us to form in ourselves by considerations on the subject proposed, a firm conviction which is the necessary foundation of effective resolutions. Otherwise the whole process will be limited to mere emotions, vivid perhaps, but ephemeral, devoid of the permanent fruit which mental prayer is intended to produce.

We have tried, therefore, to give this series of *Meditations* the doctrinal character which especially belongs to ecclesiastical meditations. To set forth spiritual doctrine exactly and clearly, to establish it on sound proofs drawn from authority and reason, to show its practical application to the conduct of life, this has been our main object. How far we have succeeded, the reader may judge.

Perhaps some will find that we have de-

veloped the points of the meditations at too great length. Our excuse is that we have tried to be complete. Then, too, we deemed this defect more easily remedied than the opposite extreme. Moreover, we had in mind those seminaries in which forty-five minutes is devoted to mental prayer. For them, as we have learned by experience, these meditations are none too long. Where but half an hour is given to this exercise, the considerations may be abridged or the meditation may be so divided that the matter of one will serve for two or three occasions.

May the Blessed Virgin, Queen of the Clergy, deign to bless this work which we have composed for the sanctification of ecclesiastics, the chosen portion of the heritage of her divine Son and the special object of her maternal love. With her blessing may it attain this purpose, by effectively helping those who are trying to perfect themselves in the holy practice of mental prayer and thereby to make more and more real the ideal of perfect life to which God calls them!

MORNING PRAYERS

Benedicta sit sancta et individua Trinitas, nunc et semper, et per infinita sæcula sæculorum. Amen.

I adore thee, most august Majesty, one God, in three persons; I adore thy divine perfections incomprehensible to men and angels. Being nothing of myself and unable to honor thee as thou deservest to be honored, I offer thee all the homage and praise which thy incarnate Word offers for me in heaven and upon earth, and with my whole heart, I unite in all that his Holy Spirit operates for thy glory in his members. Most holy and most adorable Trinity, suffer me, through Jesus Christ, our mediator with thee, and by the grace of his Holy Spirit, to offer thee my feeble tribute of homage.

Act of Adoration

Eternal Father, I adore thee as my Creator; I revere that boundless love and goodness which induced thy supreme Majesty to look down upon a less than nothing, and to bring me into existence. Eternal Word I adore thee as my Redeemer who, equal to thy Father, didst, in the womb of thy

mother, make thyself like unto us, taking upon thyself the form of a servant, living in poverty and dying in ignominy, to rise again in glory like unto that of thy Father, in order to teach us to live penitently, and to resign ourselves submissively to our sentence of death, with the full assurance of being made, by the resurrection, partakers of the glory of the children of God. Divine Spirit, I adore thee, the sanctifier of my soul, who dost consume sin in my heart by the fire of thy holy love, and dost descend continually into this abyss of iniquity, my heart, in order that by breathing into it that life-giving holiness which thou dost draw from the bosom of the Father and the Son, thou mayest make me worthy of being associated with them in their glory.

Act of Thanksgiving

Eternal Father, I thank thee for having with such great love created me; having with so much patience borne with me in spite of my transgressions, and especially for having preserved me during the past night and given me this day in which to serve and honor thee. Son of God, I thank thee for having by the labors of thy life and the sufferings of thy death preserved me a thousand times from hell, and merited for me all the blessings which are found in thy Church. Divine Spirit, I thank thee for having deigned to infuse so many gifts and graces into my soul and for having so often begotten me anew by thy sanctifying grace, notwithstanding all the contempt I have shown for thy blessings.

Act of Contrition

Pardon, I beseech thee, Eternal Father, the wretched use I have made of the body and the soul which thou hast given me with so much goodness, and hast preserved with so much mercy. I beg forgiveness, O Son of God, for having profited so little by the holy example of thy life, by the counsels of thy holy Gospel, and by the graces of all thy holy Sacraments. Divine Spirit, forgive me the contempt which I have shown for thy inspirations, for thy lights and for that lively repentance which it hath pleased thee to excite in my soul.

Act of Oblation

Eternal Father, I offer thee all the actions of this day, and I renounce all the self-satisfaction I might feel in them. Eternal Word, I offer thee all my thoughts and words, and beforehand I condemn all that are vain and useless. Spirit of God, I consecrate to thee all the affections of my heart, and I renounce all the irregular desires of nature.

Act of Resignation

Eternal Father, I renounce all confidence in my own strength and give myself entirely to thee, that thou mayest be my strength and support. Son of God, I condemn all the presumption of my own

mind and give myself up entirely to thee, to be governed by thy wisdom alone. Divine Spirit, I sacrifice to thee all my natural inclinations, in order to follow the desires of sanctity which thou implantest in pious souls. Eternal Father, do thou perfect my soul; Son of God, do thou enlighten it; Holy Spirit, do thou direct it.

Pater Noster. Ave Maria. Credo.

I offer thee once more, O my God, my thoughts, my words, and my actions, in union with those of Jesus Christ, that they may be worthy of being received by thee; and I renounce every intention, but that which he would have, were he upon earth and in my place. I unite, O my God, with his Divine Spirit, who causes thee to be loved and adored by all the angels and saints, and who fills heaven and earth with holy praises of thee, that aided by that Holy Spirit I may join with all those creatures who honor thee, and especially with those who honor thee by mental prayer.*

Some may prefer the following shorter form of morning prayers.

Benedicta sit Sancta et Individua Trinitas, nunc et semper et per infinita sæcula sæculorum. Amen.

O Almighty and Eternal God: in union with all thy elect in heaven and on earth, I adore thee, I

* From the *Journée Chrétienne* of FATHER OLIER.

love thee, I praise and thank thee for all the gifts of nature and grace, which I have received from thy infinite goodness. I thank thee principally for having created me to thy image and likeness, and preserved me to this day: for having given thy only begotten Son to suffer death for me on the cross, and to wash away my sins with his most precious blood. I thank thee for having called me to the faith of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church; for having so often pardoned me my sins, for having watched over me during this past night, and preserved me from a sudden death and from all the other evils which might have befallen me, had I not been protected by thy merciful and watchful Providence.

Would that I could make thee, O Lord, in return for all thy mercies, an offering of gratitude and love proportionate to their number and greatness. Of myself indeed I am nothing, have nothing, and can do nothing worthy of thee. But since, by a wonderful device of thy wisdom and love, I have access to thy majesty through Christ my Savior, I humbly offer thee, in union with him and through his Sacred Heart, whatever I possess, my body, my senses, all the powers of my soul. I firmly purpose by thy divine grace not to think, say or do anything unworthy of one called to the priesthood.

Help me, O Lord, to curb my evil inclinations, and so guide and sustain me in all things that every thought, word and action of mine may tend to thy greater glory, the sanctification of my soul and the good of those around me.

Pater Noster. Ave Maria. **Credo.**

Domine Deus Omnipotens, qui ad principium hujus diei nos pervenire fecisti, tua nos hodie salva virtute, ut in hac die ad nullum declinemus peccatum, sed semper ad tuam justitiam faciendam nostra procedant eloquia, dirigantur cogitationes et opera. Per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen.

Angele Dei, qui custos es mei, me tibi commissum pietate superna illumina, custodi, rege, et guberna. Amen.

Dominus nos benedicat et ab omni malo defendat et ad vitam perducat æternam; et fidelium animæ per misericordiam Dei requiescant in pace. Amen.

PREPARATION FOR MEDITATION

Before beginning meditation, there are always three things to be done:

1. *To place ourselves in the presence of God by two acts, one of faith, the other of adoration.*

My God, I firmly believe, on the authority of thy word, that thou art here present, and in the inmost recesses of my heart, as truly as that thou art in heaven, in the midst of saints and angels. O, Sovereign Majesty, my God, before whom the whole universe is but as dust, I prostrate myself before thee, acknowledging that thou art my Creator and that I am thy creature and thus I offer the homage of my whole being to thy supreme Majesty.

2. *To acknowledge ourselves unworthy of appearing before God, and thus to excite ourselves to contrition.*

I confess, O my God, that I am unworthy to appear in thy presence. I acknowledge that I do not deserve that thou shouldst look upon me, on account of my nothingness, my vileness and my numberless sins. Yea, Lord, I am filled with confusion at the sight of my own misery caused by my own sins;

but I do heartily repent having offended thee. I am sorry, because thou art infinitely good, and because sin is so displeasing to thee. Prostrate at thy feet, I implore thy grace that I may be converted, and may do penance before thee.

Confiteor, etc.

3. *To unite ourselves to Jesus Christ in order to appear before his Father in his name; and implore the aid of the Holy Ghost for our meditation.*

Not in my own name, O my God, have I the blindness to address my prayer to thee; it is in the name of thy well-beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; all my confidence is in him. Clothed in his merits I present myself before thee, to implore thy grace, like Jacob of old clad in the garments of his elder brother, presenting himself before his father to ask his blessing. I know that of myself I can have neither a good thought nor even a desire that shall conduce to my salvation. Have mercy on me, O God! I humbly confess my nothingness and my wretchedness; I renounce my own thoughts and my earthly affections, and give myself up entirely to thy divine Spirit. Come then, O Holy Ghost! enlighten my darkness; inflame my lukewarmness; strengthen my weakness. I desire to make this meditation by thy lights, by thy impulse, and under thy guidance.

Holy Virgin, mother of divine wisdom and purest love, help me, I beseech Thee, to obtain this grace.

After Meditation

O Jesu vivens in Maria, veni, et vive in famulis tuis, in spiritu sanctitatis tuæ, in plenitudine virtutis tuæ, in perfectione viarum tuarum, in veritate virtutum tuarum, in communione mysteriorum tuorum: dominare omni adversæ potestati in Spiritu tuo ad gloriam Patris. Amen.

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FIRST PART

THE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

I

THE EXCELLENCE OF GOD'S BEING

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God who possesses a perfect knowledge of his own excellence. In union with the holy soul of Jesus we will contemplate the adorable perfections of God's being.

II. The excellence of God's being is revealed to us as independent, infinite, and immutable.

1. *God is independent* in his existence, which is a prerogative of his divine nature; in his operations, of which he is the only principle; in his own end, which, like everything else, is found in himself.

2. *God is infinite.* He is a boundless ocean of truth, goodness, and beauty. He possesses all that my reason is able to conceive, all that faith teaches me, and infinitely more.

3. *God is immutable.* All that he possesses he

has by the very necessity of his nature. In a creature everything changes, but in God there is nothing changeable.

III. We will ask of God the grace to know and love him more and more and to reverence his adorable essence in our thoughts, words, and actions.

We will resolve: 1. To utter the name of God with reverence; 2. To have a deep spirit of religion in all our exercises of piety; 3. Often to raise our heart to God.

Sanctum et terribile nomen ejus.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God who possesses a perfect knowledge of his own excellence and enjoys unspeakable bliss as the fruit of this knowledge. He contemplates his divine perfections in the Word, he loves them in the Holy Ghost, and this double operation, continuing eternally without interruption or succession, constitutes his essence, his life, his repose, and his happiness. *I am who am.*[1]

Let us adore also the aspirations of the holy soul of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and the thrilling joy it experienced when it first contemplated God's unveiled being and saw the limitless expanse of his adorable perfections open out before it. Let us unite with the soul

[1] Ex. 3[14]

of Jesus in the religious duties of adoration, admiration, praise, and love that it rendered to God and will continue to render during all eternity.

In this life, O my God, I can know thee only as I perceive things on a dark night. *We see now through a glass in a dark manner.*[1] However, even in the weakness of my present state, how brightly thy divine countenance is revealed to my reason and my faith! How much do the perfections that I find in thee excell in grandeur all that creatures can offer me!

II. Considerations

The excellence of God's being is revealed to us as independent, infinite, and immutable.

1. *God is independent.* All the beings that we see in creation or of whose existence we learn by faith are, with the single exception of God, dependent and subordinate. They are dependent in their *substance*, which does not contain the principle of its existence in itself; dependent in their *operations*, which are accomplished only under the influence of external agents; dependent in their *end*, which must be

[1] I Cor. 13[12]

sought in some good distinct from themselves, the possession of which can alone make them happy. God, under this threefold aspect, enjoys the most perfect independence.

Existence is one of the prerogatives of his divine nature. He is and he lives because being and life are essential to him, because he must necessarily be, and it is inconceivable that he should not be. Thou dost exist by thyself, my God, and nothing may claim the glory of having created thee. *I am who am.*[1]

God is independent also in his *operations.* He alone is the principle and the productive cause of activity. He has no need of any outside cooperation either to conceive them or to realize them. Indeed he finds in himself the light which illumines his intellect, the force which moves his will, and the power by which his divine decrees are carried out. Nothing limits or checks his power. He exercises it without ever meeting any obstacles and it has no limitations but those of possibility itself. He speaks and the void itself becomes productive. *He spoke and they were made: He commanded and they were created.*[2]

God is independent also in his own *end,*

[1] Ex. 3[14]
[2] Ps. 32[9]

which is likewise found in the treasury of his divine essence. This end is his repose, his goodness, his supreme happiness. The life that he enjoys is not, like ours, a movement, an aspiration, a striving towards an object destined to complete it. It is the full and perfect possession of his being by intelligence and love. To be supremely happy, God is self-sufficient.

2. *God is infinite.* God, the absolute being, the being without restriction or limit, includes every perfection in himself. He is a boundless ocean of grandeur, power, majesty, and wisdom. Truth, that is, all the intelligence can know; goodness, that is, all the heart can love; beauty, that is, all the soul can admire, attain their loftiest expression in him. He possesses every excellence that I am able to conceive and infinitely more. All creation, so beautiful and perfect, is merely a rivulet taking its source in that infinite ocean of all perfection. O my God, if these creatures are enriched with such precious gifts, what must thou be and how great must be the riches of thy divine nature!

For ever and ever the angels and saints will contemplate this spectacle of divine infinity; and its endless duration instead of filling them with weariness and indifference will be an in-

exhaustible source of delight and happiness, because in the perfections of the supreme Being they will continually discover new expanses, unknown depths of truth, of wisdom, of love, unexplored treasures of mercy and holiness.

3. *God is immutable.* The royal psalmist, after describing the incessant changes in the life of creatures, says: *Thou art always the selfsame, and thy years shall not fail.*[1] Everything that God possesses, since it belongs to him by the very necessity of his nature, remains in him without alteration or change. No one has given him anything; no one can take anything away. In a creature everything changes, everything is renewed or altered, everything is subject to the vicissitude of change. In man's soul, joy and sorrow, trust and fear succeed each other ceaselessly; in his body, pleasure and pain, health and sickness.

With God there is nothing of this sort. What he was yesterday, he is to-day and will be the same forever. Years and centuries pass before him in perpetual change. He witnesses the uninterrupted renewal of the generations of man as they appear for a short moment of time only to hurl themselves one after the other into the abyss of eternity. God's life,

[1] Ps. 101[27–28]

instead of undergoing the successions of time, possesses an eternal stability. It is not made up of a series of temporal instants but of one single instant that embraces all eternity. It is not made up of distinct operations that cause and succeed one another. No, God performs only one act, he has only one thought, he utters only one word; but that act, that thought, that word are eternal as God himself.

III. Acts and Resolutions

O my God, what I see of thy perfections gives me but a feeble idea of what thou art; and yet my soul is full of wonder and admiration. Only thy light can raise my intelligence to the clear vision of thy treasures of perfection. Grant that I may know thee better so as to love thee more. *Noverim te ut amem te*,[1] said St. Augustine. Turn away my eyes from vain objects on which too often they like to rest, and fix them on thyself.

But above all impress me with that holy respect for thy adorable essence, that respect which is the first and most fundamental duty of rational creatures. May I reverence thee in my thoughts, walking always before thee,

[1] St. Augustine: *Soliloquies* 2

deeply penetrated with the consciousness of thy excellence! May I reverence thee in my words, never pronouncing thy sacred name but with the greatest respect, employing my tongue and my lips to praise thee, to exalt thee, and to bless thee! May I reverence thee in all my actions, recalling that I am always in thy sight and endeavoring to do nothing that is not worthy of thee. *Ambuletis digne Deo*[1] says St. Paul.

I resolve therefore:

1. To utter the holy name of God with profound reverence, avoiding the use of it in any trifling or joking way;

2. At all exercises of piety to have a deep spirit of religion, both internal and external, recalling that it is to God I speak;

3. Often to raise my heart to God.

Sanctum et terribile nomen ejus.[2]

II

GOD, THE CREATOR

SUMMARY

I. We will adore the holy soul of Jesus acknowledging that all its faculties are so many gifts

[1] Coloss. 1[10]

[2] Ps. 110[9]

of God and joyfully offering itself in homage to this supreme Master. It accepts all the future sacrifices in advance and, from the very first moment of its life, offers to God both itself and the whole world, which is his domain.

II. Since God is our Creator, we are in absolute dependence on him. We come from him; we subsist by him; we act in him.

1. *We come from God,* not as a portion of his substance, but because we are his work. In looking back over the course of each existence, we come finally to God. This is true of us and of all beings.

2. *We subsist by God*; for, unlike the act of an artist, the creative act of God not only operates at the first moment of our existence, but extends to its every moment. This is an evidence of our utter powerlessness.

3. *We act in God,* not only in the supernatural order, but even in the purely natural order. For reason shows that the divine action affects the faculties as well as their acts. This activity operates with wonderful delicacy.

III. We will acknowledge the supreme dominion of God over us. We will ask the grace never to forget that we are creatures.

We will resolve: 1. Joyfully to submit to God's sovereignty; 2. When making use of any creatures, to remember that they come from God; 3. To perform all our acts in a spirit of dependence on God.

Thou hast made all things in wisdom.

I. Adoration

Let us contemplate with reverence and love the holy soul of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the first exercise of its powers. Its look was turned first to God whose infinite perfections it saw directly and before whom it deeply humbled itself in adoration and love. Then it took notice of its own being, of the faculties with which it was endowed, of the treasures of knowledge that adorned its intelligence, of the surpassing gifts that enriched its will; above all, it took notice of its marvelous union with the Word and the sublime mission that it had on this account. And it understood that none of these belonged to it; they were the gifts of God, its creator and divine principle.

It accepted in advance the immolation of Calvary with all its severity as the most efficacious means of acknowledging the absolute sway of God over it and over all things. It offered homage to God the Creator, acknowledging him as the principle and source of all life and offering him the most perfect adoration in the name of all creation.

Let us unite with these perfect dispositions of Jesus Christ, the divine Mediator. In him, with him, and through him let us adore the

almighty Creator whose hands have formed us and to whom we owe all that we have and all that we are.

II. Considerations

Although perfectly happy in the possession of his being, God however, comes forth from his repose. Enjoying the plenitude of being, to which nothing can be added, he wished to give of his plenitude to beings created from nothingness by his infinite power. So he became God the Creator.

Since we are creatures: 1. We come from God; 2. We subsist through God; 3. We act in God. *Ex ipso, per ipsum, in ipso sunt omnia.*[1]

1. *We come from God. Ex ipso.* Verily, it is in God that the creature has its raison d'être and its principle. The creature is from God, not indeed as if it had received some portion of the divine substance, but in as much as God, by his infinite power, has made it out of nothing. It is from God because it is his work, the work of his intelligence which conceived the idea of it; of his love which willed and decreed it; of his word which made it pass from nothingness to being.

[1] Rom. 11[36]

If we go back over the course of each existence we necessarily arrive at a limit that marks its beginning and beyond which there is nothing. How from that nothing did existence come forth? How amidst such profound darkness was the torch of life lighted? Surely nothingness itself has not worked this wonder, for nothingness is only a name. Nor was it that creature which had no existence before. It could be only thou, my God. *Dixit, et facta sunt.*[1] At thy command creation came forth from nothing. *Mandavit, et creata sunt.*[2]

From thee every existing thing has received its being, its activity, and its life. The heavens, the land, the sea, all is the work of thy divine hands. The realm of nature, governed by such admirable laws of production, all has been made by thee. My body and its organs are thy work. What has produced this soul which thinks and acts in me? Was it not a breath from thy adorable lips?

2. *We subsist through God. Per ipsum.* The workman or the artist who impresses a new form upon some material abandons his work when he has given it the last touch, but the work continues to subsist nevertheless. Very

[1] Ps. 148[5]
[2] Ps. 148[6]

often it even survives him, entirely independent of his influence. The substance on which he works has not received its being from him; and this is how it can continue to exist without him. But with the works of God it is altogether different. To keep them from falling back into the nothingness whence his almighty hand drew them forth, it is necessary for this divine hand to sustain them and by an uninterrupted action communicate to them the being that he gave them at their creation. And if God should turn his face away from them for a single instant, at once they would return to nothingness.

The creative act of God is applied to us not only at the first moment of our existence, but at every single moment that composes it. God is creating us without cessation, not that he needs to renew his creative decree, but because that divine decree must embrace our existence in the entire extent of its duration.

So I am suspended, as it were, on the brink of nothingness, into which the natural tendency and movement of my fragile existence would hurl me, were I not held up by thy powerful hand. To annihilate me thou wouldst not have to pronounce a single word, as thou didst to create me. It would be enough simply to discontinue the divine influence by which thou

dost sustain my being, simply to withdraw the support of thy arm.

3. *We act in God. In ipso.* Not only do I come from God, not only do I subsist through him, but this power of acting, which is the very essence of my being, can not be exercised, can not produce one single act except by the help of God, without whom I can do nothing.

Faith teaches me that in the supernatural order it is the same. The help of divine grace is the indispensable condition of every truly Christian work.

Reason no less clearly shows us the need of divine concurrence in order to act even in the purely natural order. Since, at every instant of our life, we are the result of God's creative act, of necessity this action applies to everything that is in us or that comes from us; penetrating the inmost depths of our being, it affects not only the substance but also its modes, not only the faculties but the exercise thereof, not only the motive power that acts in us but the actions by which it is manifested. God can not make us active beings without at the same time creating the determinations of our activity even where liberty enjoys its most complete independence and most entire sovereignty. And these determinations, in virtue of a mysterious law, are at once the acts

of God and of man: of God, because he is the first cause; of man, because his will produces them.

So it is true, almighty God, that I am nothing without thee. It is in thee and through thee that I act, and my power of action, so extensive in spite of the limitations that confine it, is more thine than mine. Sin alone, which is not so much an act as a negation, a defect, does not require the concurrence of God.

What ought to fill me with wonder and admiration is that this divine action, without which I can do nothing, operates in me in such an intimate and delicate way that nothing in my consciousness reveals it to me. Its presence escapes my deepest reflection. I am subject to it without feeling it; and I can hardly convince myself that I do not act with the utmost independence.

III. Acts and Resolutions

Since God is the Creator of all things, he is also their supreme master. Everything belongs to him more completely than a piece of work belongs to the workman who conceived it and made it.

From the very depths of my soul, my God, I acknowledge and adore thy sovereign domin-

ion over me and all creatures. Although in my poverty I have nothing to give thee, yet in acknowledgment of what I have received from thy infinite bounty I wish at least to offer thee my homage, confessing, at the same time, that all is thine and that I can attribute to myself only nothingness and sin.

Dear Lord, deign by thy grace to make these dispositions penetrate more and more deeply into my heart, so that, I may recognize my dependence and thy supreme dominion not in a merely speculative, but in a practical way and never forget that, as a creature, I belong entirely to thee, my Lord and Master.

I resolve therefore:

1. By an interior act of adoration, to honor frequently the absolute dominion of God over all things, submitting myself to him with love and joy;

2. To recall, when using the creatures of God, that they are a gift from him who made them for me;

3. To perform all my actions, both internal and external, in a spirit of dependence upon God, without whom I can do nothing.

Thou hast made all things in wisdom.[1]

[1] Ps. 103[24]

III

GOD, OUR LAST END

SUMMARY

I. We will adore our Lord aspiring towards God to repose in him. The whole life of Jesus was a manifestation of this disposition. In his mysteries, his joys, and his sorrows, he verified these words: *Vado ad Patrem.*

II. God is our last end since he alone can satisfy our aspirations:

1. *God is the supreme Truth.* The first aspiration of our soul is for knowledge. This desire will be satisfied only on that day when the truth will be revealed to us in all its fullness. The dispersed rays that reach us here below make us sigh for the day when it will flood us with its brightness.

2. *God is the norm of perfection.* Our will desires to conform to what is good. An instinct makes us disapprove what is bad. God alone is that absolute ideal of perfection to which we aspire.

3. *God is the supreme Good.* Above all the particular things that we seek, one good predominates. This Good, which we can attain, is the infinitely good Being. The only supreme blessedness is God.

III. By an act of faith we will acknowledge that God is our end: we will regret having so often forgotten this truth. Lastly, we will ask God to incline our hearts towards himself constantly.

We will resolve:

1. To recall that God is our end;
2. Every morning to resolve to strive towards that end;
3. To free our hearts from any attachments that may turn us from that end.

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find repose in thee.

I. Adoration

Let us adore our Lord Jesus Christ, aspiring towards God, in his fervent craving for God as his last end and supreme Good, saying by the mouth of the psalmist: *The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; it is thou that wilt restore my inheritance to me . . .* [1] *Thou art the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion forever.*[2] Our blessed Lord, after adoring the infinite majesty of his Father as revealed to his intellect, after offering the homage of his being and his august prerogatives, unites himself to God by a most pure and ardent act of love, directing every thought of his soul, every aspiration of his heart, every desire of his will, toward that divine goal.

The entire life of Christ on earth was the manifestation of this love, as his glory in

[1] Ps. 15[5]
[2] Ps. 72[26]

heaven is its crown and consummation. Always and under all circumstances it is in God and God alone that he rests and takes pleasure, that he hopes and trusts. So these words, uttered by his own adorable lips, are constantly verified: *Vado ad Patrem.*[1] He went to his Father in all his mysteries, all his joys, all his bitter sorrows, all the desires of his soul, all the words that his lips uttered, all the acts of his life. He never departed from the way leading to God, where he journeyed onward with incomparable fervor, generosity, and joy. Let us admire these dispositions of the Sacred Heart of our Lord. Let us honor the saints, who after the example of Jesus, their Master and model, turned towards God, their last end, with perfect faithfulness, disregarding all earthly attractions that would not help them attain this blessed end.

II. Considerations

Three fundamental aspirations sum up the higher life of my soul: the aspirations toward truth, towards the good, and towards happiness. This triple movement leads necessarily to God.

1. *God is the supreme Truth,* the knowledge

[1] John 16[16]

of which we crave. The first need of our soul is to know; the first object that it pursues is truth. This need is manifested from our earliest years and we remain subject to its influence during the entire course of our life. Ignorance burdens us, doubt torments us. We seek the truth no less eagerly than we do the food that is to nourish our body; and to acquire it we give ourselves up to diligent and persevering study and contemplation.

Thus we find an end to be reached. We attain it incompletely each time we raise a corner of the veil that conceals the truth. But our desire for knowledge will remain unsatisfied until the day when the truth will be revealed to us in all its fullness. What can this complete and perfect view of truth be unless the sight of God manifesting himself to our soul and lighting it up by his unveiled presence?

Indeed, thou alone, my God, dost possess truth without alloy; rather thou art Truth itself. For, to know the truth, thou hast only to contemplate thy own divine essence; it is towards thee that all created minds turn to receive that heavenly food which can alone nourish the human intellect.

From the depths of my darkness I catch a glimpse of thy infinite splendor, of which but a faint reflection reaches me. The dispersed

and weakened rays that it casts upon me make me long for that perfect day when it will flood me with the brightness of eternal and perfect truth. Such is the end which I endeavor to approach by my studies, in my intercourse with the learned, which I pursue in my meditations, as well as in the contemplation of creation. It is thee, the supreme Truth, that I desire to contemplate in all these efforts of my intellect. This striving will cease only when thou art revealed to my soul without cloud or veil. *Satiabor cum apparuerit gloria tua.*[1]

2. *God is the norm of perfection* to which our will seeks to conform itself. While my intellect craves to attain the truth, my will feels the need of realizing by its acts whatever is good. Instinct forces me to disapprove evil and inclines me towards the good. When through passion or interest I disregard this law of my nature, remorse quickly makes me feel its goad; trouble, grief and anguish take the place of my former joy and interior peace.

To satisfy this internal disposition it is not enough that I abstain from evil. Before me there opens up a vast expanse of moral perfection, an ideal that I should try to realize. Doubtless I am far from conforming to it; often I even wander far from it. But its image

[1] Ps. 16[15]

never leaves me; I feel that I ought to make it the rule of my life; when I fail to, I accuse myself of a weakness. And, strange as it may seem, the more I satisfy this desire for perfection, the more it is enkindled and developed within me. Men who are given up to the depraved tendencies of their evil nature, scarcely feel it. In fervent souls, on the contrary, it is strongly manifested and produces almost incredible efforts to realize the ideal.

This desire, which is the loftiest and purest I experience, can not be an illusion. If it is not, then surely there must be outside of me a rule of perfection imposed on my liberty, an order to which I should conform. That order, absolute, eternal, necessary, immutable, infinitely wise and perfect, in a word, is God himself.

Thou dost appear to me now, O my God, as my last end. To thee my soul turns in that desire for perfection which is ever present, persistently urging me to become better. Thou art the rule of holiness, the supreme law to which every created will to be truly good ought to conform. Thou art the type of every moral beauty, the ideal which I should constantly try to realize. *Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.*[1]

[1] MATTH. 5[48]

3. *God is the supreme Good,* which our heart desires. My actions have happiness for their end. My heart tends toward happiness and exerts its power and energy to attain it.

But above all other aims I pursue there is one that dominates and includes them all, one which constitutes the supreme happiness towards which, as towards their final goal, all my aspirations and desires are directed.

This good exists and can be attained. Otherwise there would be instincts in me that could not be satisfied, tendencies without an object, activities without an end. This good exists and can be attained. For the infinitely good and wise Creator implanted this idea and longing in me; and surely he could not take pleasure in making me the plaything of a deceptive illusion. My life has an end, the attaining of which will satisfy my thirst for happiness.

But what is this end, and where shall I find it? Evidently it is not in myself. I am not, like God, my own happiness. When I descend to the depths of my soul, what do I find there? Nothing but darkness, infirmity, numberless wants. I can not examine myself deeply without a feeling of grief. To find happiness I must seek beyond myself.

Nor can the visible world about me supply that ideal of happiness which I pursue, even though all creation should unite to gratify me.

Thou alone, my God, art the source of every good; thou art perfect happiness. If created things procure any pleasure for me, it is from thee the pleasure flows. When I seek happiness outside of thee, I am deceived and led astray. *Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find repose in thee.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

Since towards thee, my God, all my aspirations and longings are directed, verily thou art my last end. I have been created by thee and toward thee all my life should be directed. In our catechism we read these words: *God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in the next.*[2] This truth, though very elementary, is one that a great number of men reject or at least do not appreciate.

We will not consider those great philosophers, geniuses though they be, who have

[1] St. Augustine: *Conf.*, I. 1.
[2] *Balt. Catech.*

thought to find the last end of man outside the Christian faith, and who *became vain in their thoughts*.[1] They have substituted wild chimeras for the truth. There are, however, some Christians who in theory admit this fundamental truth but forget it in practice, who pass their life far from God and seem to consider as their only end the gratification of the senses.

O my God, do I not often fall into this strange contradiction? I believe thou art my end. But is my life the practical expression of this belief? Art thou, as a matter of fact, the only end toward which I turn in all things? Does my heart take all its pleasures in thee, despising all the rest and finding its joy and happiness in thee alone?

If such, indeed, is the trend of my life considered as a whole, how often every day do I not stray from this path in the details of my actions and desires! How many activities there are in my heart that have not thee for their end! What attachment to created things! What inquietudes, what preoccupations, inspired by self-love, curiosity, or sensuality!

By thy grace, dear Lord, deign to correct my ways and to incline my heart towards thee.

[1] Rom. 1[21]

Incline my heart into thy testimonies and not to covetousness.[1] Turn my eyes away from finite things so that I may no longer seek the vain satisfactions of earth. Grant that I may journey through life by the path that leads to thee. *Turn away my eyes that they may not behold vanity,* says the psalmist, *quicken me in thy way.*[2]

I resolve:

1. To recall often that God is my last end;

2. At the beginning of each day to renew my resolution to strive towards that end ceaselessly;

3. To earnestly endeavor to free my heart from attachments that may turn me from that end.

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find repose in thee.[3]

IV

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

SUMMARY

I. We will adore our Lord proclaiming in every circumstance the providence that God exercises

[1] Ps. 118[36]
[2] Ps. 118[37]
[3] St. Augustine: *Conf.* I, 1.

over his creatures. At the same time he gives us beautiful examples of total abandonment to the watchful care of our heavenly Father.

II. We will consider what is implied by the presence of a divine Providence in the world.

1. *Nothing is done except in the sight of God.* God, being infinite in his knowledge, sees and hears everything. Every being is always in his presence. This is a terrible thought for the sinner but for the just man a sweet consolation.

2. *Nothing is done except by the permission of God.* No doubt, the activity of God is hidden but it is none the less real. His empire over human wills appears most strikingly in relation to the Church, which wicked men can persecute but never destroy.

3. *Nothing happens except in fulfillment of the providential plan of God.* If everything in the physical world has a purpose, it is so also in the moral world. In tolerating evil, God finds a way to make it serve his own ends. Such is the solid foundation of the confidence which sustains the just in the midst of tribulation.

II. Often have we merited the reproach: *Why are you fearful, oh ye of little faith?* We will ask God to give us a more lively confidence in his providence. We will abandon ourselves entirely to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We will resolve:

1. Often to renew our faith in a divine Providence;

2. To accept all that happens to us as coming from the hand of God;

3. To banish every disquieting solicitude.

Dominus regit me, et nihil mihi deerit.

I. Adoration

Let us adore our Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledging and proclaiming in every circumstance the providence that God exercises over his creatures. His all-seeing eye follows them along every path to direct them, to supply their needs and conduct them to the place that he has reserved for them.

He likes us to represent God under the image of a father full of tender solicitude, with a searching look that nothing escapes, a father who is never indifferent to any of his children. He it is who gives such a brilliant vesture to the lilies of the field, and to the sparrows their grains of nourishment. He counts the hairs of our head and not a single one falls without his permission; he listens to our prayers and answers them. Moreover, he knows what we need better than we do ourselves and gives it to us even before we ask it. He wants us to have complete confidence in him, to trust him for everything, and to be assured that his protection and succor will never fail us.

What touching examples the Savior himself gives us of this complete dependence on God which he so strongly recommends! From the

very beginning of his life, he trusted himself to God without reserve. In his trials he always has recourse to God. *Preserve me, O Lord, for I have put my trust in thee.*[1] God is his faithful and vigilant shepherd under whose guidance he lacks nothing. *The Lord ruleth me and I shall want nothing.*[2]

Finally, at the moment of death, he confidently entrusts his soul to the hands of the Father, always so full of tenderness for him. *Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.*[3]

Let us honor these dispositions of our Lord's heart with all the homage of our own heart, and let us try to obtain them for ourselves.

II. Considerations

Not content with offering himself to us as our last end, God, though respecting our free will, leads us by the hand to that blessed goal. His providence has accompanied us through all the paths of life until this very moment.

[1] Ps. 15[1]
[2] Ps. 22[1]
[3] Luke 23[46]

Nothing in the world is abandoned to the caprice of chance. But all events, whatever they may be, take place: 1. in the sight of God; 2. by his permission; 3. in accordance with his providential plan.

1. *Nothing is done except in the sight of God.* God, being infinite in his knowledge as in his other attributes, sees everything.

We should not represent him as a king isolated and far removed beyond the world in the majestic solitude of his palace. No! On the contrary, he is intimately present to the beings he has created and still preserves by his almighty power. Although his divine substance is perfectly simple, yet it permeates everything, surrounds and contains everything. *In him,* says St. Paul, *we live, and move, and are.*[1] In virtue of this universal presence, not only is God's eye ever turned upon all the beings in the world, but he also perceives their every act. *Neither is there any creature invisible in his sight: but all things are naked and open to his eyes.*[2]

This is a terrible thought for the sinner who offends thee; for thou art the sure witness

[1] ACTS 17^{28}
[2] HEBR. 4^{13}

of the wickedness to which he abandons himself. But it is infinitely consoling for the faithful soul whose trials thou seest, whose sacrifices thou reckonest, whose cries and prayers thou hearest. To such a soul what does it matter that men forget it, misunderstand it, despise it; what does it matter even if they pursue it with violence? Is it not enough to know that God sees all and that in heaven there is a witness whose eye nothing escapes? *For behold my witness is in heaven, and he that knoweth my conscience is on high.*[1]

2. *Nothing is done except by the permission of God.* To judge things superficially, it would seem that God is only an idle spectator of the events in the world. His hand is hidden. Except in some extraordinary circumstances, his activity in the world is not apparent. The power of his creatures appears to possess unrestrained sovereignty. What makes the intervention of God in things here below even more difficult to perceive is that everything seems given over to the caprice of chance, to the sway of the passions, to the power of physical forces. In appearance at least, confusion and disorder seem to rule.

[1] JOB 16^{20}

Although hidden, the action of God is none the less real. While respecting the liberty of creatures, he rules it, directs its exercise, and limits it according to his own pleasure. The wicked themselves, to whom God has given such astonishing power for evil, accomplish only what he allows them to do. God, while seeming to leave a free field to human activity, confines it within limits which it will never exceed. Even when it goes astray and gives itself up to the greatest excesses, it is ever subordinated to the supreme will that governs it, against which it can do nothing; which says to it: *Thou shalt go no further.*[1]

This empire of God over human wills appears most striking in relation to the Church, which wicked men can attack, persecute, even seem to conquer. But they can never succeed in destroying it. It is on this foundation that the Church places its unshaken confidence in the midst of strifes; and we know this confidence will not be confounded.

3. *Nothing happens except in fulfillment of the providential plan of God.* Since he is infinitely wise, God can not do anything, can not even admit anything useless or superfluous in his works. With how much greater reason

[1] Job 38[11]

must he exclude anything that would be an obstacle to the ends that he has prescribed.

So everything in the world has its end, its usefulness, a reason for its existence. Thus it is in the physical world and could not be otherwise in the moral world. Doubtless God does not will everything in the same way. He approves what is good; and though tolerating evil, he forbids and condemns it. But since he admits both in his divine plan, he must have found the way to make them both serve the ends that he wills to attain and to make even sin contribute to the beauty and harmony of the universe.

As we well know, in the government of the world God has no other purpose but to sanctify his elect on earth that he may glorify them eternally in heaven. Such is the end that everything realizes after its own manner, and this is why the apostle could say very truly that everything coöperates for the good of those who love God. *And we know that to them that love God, all things work together unto good.*[1]

Thus, my God, thou showest thou art at once infinitely wise and infinitely good. Infinitely wise, since, without willing evil, thou

[1] Rom. 8[28]

hast found the secret of making it serve in the accomplishment of thy adorable designs; infinitely good, since the end to which thou dost subordinate everything has been inspired by thy love for us.

Such is the solid foundation of the peace and joy that sustains the faithful soul amid the strifes and trials that fill our life here below. It is convinced that God, who directs all, will know how to turn even the saddest trial to its advantage, and that the thorns on the way will some day become jewels in its crown.

III. Acts and Resolutions

Thy Gospel, my Jesus, offers a touching example of that hidden but supremely efficacious providence by which thou watchest over us. One day, when crossing the Lake of Genesareth, asleep in the boat, thou didst permit a violent tempest to arise. Thy apostles, forgetting that they had no danger to fear in thy company, are frightened; they run to thee and beseech thee to come to their aid. *Lord*, they cry out, *save us, we perish.*[1] Then, rebuking

[1] Matth. 8[25]

their lack of faith, thou didst command the sea, *and there came a great calm.*[1]

How often, Lord, have I merited the same reproach as the apostles because of my little confidence in thy providence. I must know that thou rulest everything, that thou art always with us, and thy mercy accompanies us at every step of our lives. In time of trial, however, because thou seemest to sleep and I do not hear thy voice, I am troubled and disturbed, I forget the guidance and protection of thy paternal hand.

Give me a more and more lively faith in the consoling truth of thy providence. In all events, happy and unhappy, may I see and reverence that wise and adorable Providence, always so good and merciful, always deserving of my love. May I confide myself to thee, may I abandon myself entirely to thee with all I have and all that I am, at present and in the future, for time and eternity. *Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.*[2]

I resolve therefore:

1. Often during the day to renew my faith in a divine Providence;

[1] MATTH. 8^{26}
[2] ROM. 14^{8}

2. To accept all that happens, whether good or bad, as coming from the hand of God and not from the hand of men;

3. In the future to banish every disquieting solicitude, since I know that God never abandons those whom he loves.

Dominus regit me, et nihil mihi deerit.[1]

V

THE MERCY OF GOD

SUMMARY

I. We will bless and exalt the mercy that God extends to sinners. We will adore in our Lord Jesus Christ the most touching expression of the merciful heart of God.

II. The mercy of God toward sinners is manifested in three ways.

1. *In patient mildness he bears with them in the midst of their wanderings.* God does not make the sinful soul feel his anger, nor does he deprive it of those blessings which he showers on his creatures.

2. *His mercy to sinners is manifested also by the tender solicitations that he addresses to them.* He

[1] Ps. 22[1]

follows them and calls them. Our Lord teaches us this truth still better in the parables of the Gospel, and in these words of the Apocalypse: *Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock.*

3. *God's mercy is especially manifested in the incomparable love that he extends to sinners when they return to him.* To be convinced of this, we have only to recall the principal circumstances of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

III. We will acknowledge how much we owe to God's mercy; we will enliven our confidence; we will promise to be more generous in the service of our divine Master.

We will resolve:

1. To recall the great mercies of God;
2. To conceive a keen regret for our faults;
3. To serve God with all our heart.

Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock.

I. Adoration

Let us bless and exalt the mercy of God, repeating the words of the royal psalmist: *Give glory to the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever*[1] . . . . *The earth is full of the mercy of the Lord.*[2]

[1] Ps. 105[1]
[2] Ps. 32[5]

My Jesus, in thee I find the most touching expression of God's merciful heart; from the very depths of his mercy thou wast sent on earth to be our light and our salvation. *To enlighten them that sit in darkness . . . . to direct our feet into the way of peace.*[1] So it is in thee above all that I ought to adore the divine mercy and confidently implore it. *Let us go therefore with confidence to the throne of grace; that we may obtain mercy.*[2]

II. Considerations

The mercy of God toward sinners is manifested in three ways: 1. in his patient mildness; 2. in his earnest solicitations; 3. in his incomparable love.

1. *In patient mildness God bears with sinners in the midst of their wanderings.* The soul that gives itself up to sin offends God in the most serious manner. In separating itself from this supreme Being, it is guilty of despising him, of disobeying him, and of revolting against him. This soul well deserves that God, so shamefully outraged, should make it

[1] Luke 1[79]
[2] Hebr. 4[16]

feel the effects of his anger and should cast it headlong into hell. At least it would be just for him to deprive it of those blessings which he showers upon his creatures, blessings which the ungrateful sinner no longer deserves. Yet God does neither. He bears with the sinful soul even in its farthest straying away.

It outrages him and blasphemes him, but he remains silent. It laughs at his threats, but does not draw his anger down upon it. It insults his power, but he does not use that power to punish it. It is thus by the inexhaustible patience which he extends to sinners that God manifests his great mercy. *The Lord is gracious and merciful; patient and plenteous in mercy.*[1] What would I have become, O my God, if thou hadst not often exercised this merciful patience towards me, if thou hadst not borne with me and waited?

Not only does God, in his goodness, not punish the sinner who offends him, but he bestows all sorts of favors upon him. He sustains his existence and his life. He makes the sun rise on him the same as on his faithful followers. Is it not marvelous that God, in the distribution of his blessings, acts in such a way that he seems to make no distinction

[1] Ps. 144[8]

between the good, who love and serve him, and the bad, who offend him? And if we were to judge only by external appearances, we might well believe that he has an equal fondness for them both.

2. The mercy of God to sinners is manifested still more by *the tender solicitations that he addresses to them to convert them.* If God consulted only rules of justice, He would abandon the sinner who abandons him. He would leave him to his own hardness of heart. But love inspires a different sort of conduct. He always leaves the path open for the prodigal's return. Even more: he leaves nothing undone to draw the sinner back from the abyss into which he has fallen. He goes after him, calls him, invites him. He uses exhortations and threats; He even goes to beg and implore his return. We might almost say that he asks it as a favor.

This merciful goodness of God, inviting the sinner to be converted is manifested most strikingly in the comparisons which our Lord uses in the Gospel. He compares it to a woman who is desolate because she has lost part of her treasure and who gives herself no rest until she finds it. Or it is a shepherd who leaves his flock to seek in the mountains the sheep that has strayed away. But the fond

tenderness with which God urges the sinner to be converted is shown in no place better than in the mild, sweet words of the *Apocalypse* which the Savior addresses to the sinner: *Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock.*[1]

When a man drives God out of his heart, the divine Master does not, on that account, go away. He stays at the door of that heart, and he does not cease knocking until the door has been opened for him once more.

3. God's mercy is especially manifested in *the incomparable love he extends to sinners when they return to him. How great is the mercy of the Lord, and his forgiveness to them that turn to Him!*[2] Our Lord himself has pictured it in one of the most touching parables of the Gospel, that of the Prodigal Son.

In the first place, to find favor before his father whom he had outraged, the prodigal has only to come back, confess his fault, and express his repentance. All that he says are these simple words: *Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.*[3] At once the fond parent is touched and softened, and with outstretched arms receives his repentant son.

[1] Apoc. 3^{20}
[2] Eccli. 17^{28}
[3] Luke 15^{21}

God likewise, to receive a sinner and pardon him, asks nothing more. *A contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*[1]

The father of the prodigal does not make him wait for the favor he asks. It is with the same promptness, the same eagerness, that God pardons a sinner upon his return. As soon as the act of repentance is produced in the heart of a sinner, at once, without any delay whatever, God gives his favor and his love.

The prodigal's father, in pardoning his son, might have reproached him as he deserved. But he does not. For his repentant son he has only marks of tenderness and pity. In the delicacy of his love he speaks to him and treats him as if he had forgotten all. More touching still is the mercy of God towards the sinner who is converted. Strange to say, it is when he communicates his consolations most abundantly that he makes the effect of his grace felt more gently.

Once reestablished in his father's favor, the prodigal son is again placed in possession of all the goods and all the privileges that he had deserved to lose. So it is with the repentant sinner. In offending God, he has

[1] Ps. 50[19]

despoiled himself of all his riches, but he gets them all back upon his return.

Finally, the prodigal's return gives his father great happiness, so that he wishes his entire household to rejoice with him. Our Lord tells us that in heaven there is great rejoicing among the angels of God upon the conversion of a sinner. *There shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doth penance.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

How many times in my life, O my God, have I felt the precious effects of thy mercy! Or rather, that mercy has not ceased to protect me. With the royal prophet I can say: *Thy mercy will follow me all the days of my life.*[2]

Since I am so greatly indebted to God's mercy, I ought to be penetrated with a lively sense of appreciation and obligation for it.

Knowing, as I do, that God's goodness is inexhaustible and that, in spite of the greatness of my faults, he waits only for my repentance that he may pardon me, I will close my heart against all thought of despair, of discourage-

[1] Luke 15[7]
[2] Ps. 22[6]

ment, or of diffidence which the devil would like to arouse in me. No matter what comes, I will hope in thee, my God, and I will abandon myself to that mercy which has never repulsed the humble and repentant soul.

The remembrance of thy mercy will inspire me with new zeal and a greater generosity in thy service. Indeed, how could I become lax, negligent, and lukewarm towards such a good and merciful Master?

I resolve therefore:

1. To recall frequently God's great mercies to me, and to thank him for them;

2. To regret my faults more and more keenly;

3. With all my powers, to love and serve God, who has shown me so much love.

Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock.[1]

VI

THE THOUGHT OF GOD

SUMMARY

I. We will adore Jesus Christ, penetrated by the recollection of the presence of God from the very

[1] Apoc. 3[20]

dawn of his intellectual life. The sight of creatures never turned him from this thought.

II. To realize the importance of thinking of God, we will consider that:

1. *Nothing is more worthy than the thought of God.* God is the most perfect object our intellect can know. The thought of him elevates the soul so that it shares the blessedness of heaven.

2. *Nothing is more just than the thought of God.* We should think of him on account of the blessings of every moment and our continual need of his help.

3. *Nothing is more salutary than the thought of God.* In the first place, it sanctifies us since it takes us away from sin, urges to the practice of virtue, and develops perfect love in us. In the second place, the remembrance of God's presence offers us an unfailing and universal consolation.

III. We will humble ourselves when we recall how the saints perpetually recollected the presence of God. We will ask the grace to have the thought of his holy presence deeply graven on our souls.

We will resolve to think of God: 1. Every time we meet his divine name; 2. At the beginning of every undertaking; 3. In our troubles and temptations.

I set the Lord always in my sight.

I. Adoration

Let us adore our Lord Jesus Christ, penetrated by the recollection of God's presence and

always directing towards this supreme Being all the thoughts of his soul and all the activities of his heart. By the mouth of his prophet, he said: *I set the Lord always in my sight.*[1]

From the very beginning of his life on earth until its glorious consummation he never turned his eyes from this divine object. To contemplate the infinite being of God, whose unveiled and unclouded majesty he saw continually; to admire, to praise, to exalt, to love the perfections that he found there; to humble himself, to lose himself in that boundless ocean of truth and goodness: such was the unique occupation of his life. In the recollection of God's constant presence he found his repose, his joy, and his nourishment.

The sight of creatures, far from turning his mind from this thought, on the contrary always recalled it. He saw in creatures, even more perfectly than Adam saw before his sin, the eternal concepts of God's intellect, the works of his wisdom, the effects of his power, the images of his beauty, the effusions of his love. They all served to multiply the religious activities that continually took place in his soul.

[1] Ps. 15[8]

II. Considerations

That we may direct our soul to the thought of God as often as possible, let us consider that: 1. nothing is more worthy than the thought of God; 2. nothing more just; 3. nothing more salutary. *It is truly worthy and just, right and profitable unto salvation, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto thee.*[1]

1. *Nothing is more worthy.* Of all the objects that the intellect can know and represent, God is without question the greatest, the noblest, the most perfect. He is the very principle of existence, by his very essence he is truth, infinite goodness and beauty, supreme wisdom, the sum total of all perfections. To contemplate him and to think of him is the loftiest use a rational being can make of his intellect. The soul, in fixing its gaze upon God, unites itself to him, is nourished by his truth, illumined by the rays of light that flow from him, and, so to speak, is thus mysteriously assimilated to this supreme Being. By the thought of God, everything in us is elevated and ennobled.

When the intellect applies itself to material

[1] *Preface of the Mass.*

objects, it is weighed down to sordid matter; when it applies itself to God, it takes on a sort of divine form.

The man of innocent heart sees God in everything and converses familiarly with him. The angels and the blessed see the face of God without interruption. On earth, the soul which has freed itself from the bonds of sin and raised itself to the contemplation of things eternal, participates in the perfection of this double state. On the one hand, it repeats, in some way, the life of Adam before his sin; on the other hand, it foreshadows, as much as the weakness of our present state allows, the happiness of heaven. So, then, nothing is worthier and nobler than the thought of God.

2. *Nothing is more just.* We are commanded to think of God frequently: by the respect which his presence ought to inspire; by our gratitude for the blessings that he continually showers upon us; by our continual need of his help.

Respect for the presence of God. The first law of respect is to be occupied with those who honor us by their presence, to give them our attention, to converse with them, to listen to them, to show esteem and deference by our whole conduct.

But God, the sovereign Majesty, is always

present. We are in him and he is in us, and no matter where we go we can not escape from his presence. *Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy face? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I descend into hell, thou art present*:[1]

Gratitude to God for his many blessings. Not only is God near us, but he is occupied with us, thinks of us, and watches over us. His power created us and continues to sustain us, his providence directs, surrounds, and protects us. His inexhaustible goodness rescues us from poverty by providing for us with lavish munificence. Can we, the objects of such a tender and attentive solicitude, can we forget our generous benefactor who is thinking of us incessantly; can we receive the blessings that he bestows so freely and not glorify him in return?

Our need of God's help. As creatures we are in absolute dependence on God. Without him we can do nothing. He is the light illumining our soul, the power moving our will. No project, no undertaking can succeed unless he bless it and give it his approval. What a strong motive to make us raise our eyes to him, to ask his help and protection in every

[1] Ps. 138[7-8]

necessity, so that we may say with the psalmist: *I set the Lord always in my sight.*[1]

In this way our life will be one continual prayer uniting us to God, drawing down his grace upon us in abundance, and assuring us of his support.

3. *There is nothing more salutary than the thought of God.* Of all the thoughts to which our soul might apply itself, the thought of God is, without exception, the most sanctifying and the most consoling.

It is the most sanctifying thought. A life of perfection includes three degrees: flight from sin, the practice of virtues, the union of the soul to God by love. Such are also the precious fruits of the habitual remembrance of God's presence.

It takes us away from sin. Scripture tells us that the first act of a soul which gives itself up to sin is to turn its thought away from God. *They have not set God before their eyes,*[2] said the psalmist when speaking of sinners. In the same sense it was said of the corrupt judges of Israel: *They turned away their eyes that they might not look unto heaven.*[3] How, then, since

[1] Ps. 15[8]
[2] Ps. 53[5]
[3] Dan. 13[9]

we are always in God's sight, could we let ourselves offend his sovereign majesty if we were penetrated with a consciousness of his presence?

The thought of God encourages us in the practice of Christian virtues. What force, what energy to perform every act of virtue that opportunity offers would we not derive from the persistent recollection of this thought, what courage to correspond faithfully to the invitations of grace. God watches us; he is a constant witness of all our acts; he hears our words and his eye detects even the most secret aspirations of our soul towards him.

Lastly, the thought of God develops and perfects the love which is the climax and consummation of all virtues. If I love God but feebly, it is because I do not know him, it is because I do not apply myself well enough to the consideration of his infinite perfections and loveableness. But if God be the habitual object of my thoughts, then in the same measure that his image is graven on my soul, will my heart be inflamed with his love. So, the thought of God is the most sanctifying of all thoughts.

It is also the most consoling. What consolation a Christian finds in the assurance that

God is at his side, as a faithful friend, whose companionship and support will never fail him.

Other supports are uncertain. How many times have they not deceived me? But that which the presence of God offers can never fail me.

It is a universal consolation that applies to every sorrow I can feel. There are some griefs that human consolation can not soothe because they are too great or too delicate and interior. But whatever may be the griefs and disappointments that befall us, the thought of God's presence will always be strong enough to afford relief or at least to sweeten the bitterness of our sorrow.

III. Acts and Resolutions

O my God, I know there are some souls who almost never lose sight of thy divine presence. They hold converse with creatures, they attend to the external needs of their calling; but in the midst of these occupations, the aspirations of their heart constantly lead them to thee. In the life of St. Vincent de Paul there is mention of a man, living in the distractions of business life, who sorrowfully acknowledged to this holy priest that one day he had spent a half-hour without thinking of God.

What reason I have to humble myself when I compare myself with such holy souls: They lived in constant intercourse with thee. Their prayer was continual. Their bodily life was on earth but their souls dwelt in heaven.

I am so deeply immersed in sordid concerns and absorbed by the thought of creatures that scarcely ever do I raise the gaze of my soul to thee. I enjoy the existence which thou hast given me, without realizing that it comes from thee; I use the goods which thy hand has bounteously supplied, but I do not think of blessing that generous hand. I live in forgetfulness of thy unlimited goodness which supplies me with everything, thy infinite majesty which is manifested in so many ways, thy divine being which surrounds me and penetrates my very soul.

Vouchsafe, O Lord, to rid me of this deplorable blindness. Turn my eyes from the vanity that holds them captive and fix them on thyself. Recall my thoughts which too often are astray and dissipated. Engrave on my soul the remembrance of thy holy presence.

I resolve:

1. To think of God every time I pronounce his name or meet it in reading;

2. To renew this thought at the beginning of every undertaking,

3. In weariness, suffering and temptations, to sustain my courage by recalling the presence of God.

I set the Lord always in my sight.[1]

VII

SALVATION

SUMMARY

I. We will admire God making our salvation the end of all his works, and we will adore our blessed Lord concurring in this work by all his mysteries and all the supernatural order that he established. We will also admire the saints who lived only to save their souls.

II. In order to realize the importance of saving our soul we will consider that:

1. *Our salvation is a work to which we must subordinate everything.* We must give the first place to our salvation because it is our most sacred duty and most precious interest. Since salvation is our last end, everything else must be only a means to reach it. This truth the saints well understood.

2. *Our salvation is a work to which we must, if need be, sacrifice everything.* What does misfortune here below signify if we are to be happy in heaven? What will the pleasures of earth amount

[1] Ps. 15[8]

to if we are condemned to hell? *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

III. We will regret having appreciated these truths so poorly. We will ask the grace to work out our salvation assiduously and generously.

We will resolve:

1. To realize the need of saving our soul;

2. Always to take the point of view of our salvation.

What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?

I. Adoration

Let us adore God and thank him for having made our salvation the object of his care and the end of all his works. We have been made to save our immortal souls. It is likewise towards this great end that God's providence directs all the events of the world. Our salvation is their object.

Let us adore our Lord Jesus Christ, concurring in this work by all the mysteries of his life. It was for our salvation that he became man: *Propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem, descendit de caelis et incarnatus est.*[1] It was for our salvation that he performed miracles during his public life, that he preached

[1] ***Nicene Creed.***

his doctrine in the world and laid the foundation of his Church. For our salvation he suffered and died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. For our salvation also he continues to live on earth substantially in the Eucharist, and by his grace in the souls of the faithful.

It was the hope of salvation that inspired, directed and encouraged the saints. To attain this great end the martyrs despised torments and even death; hermits left everything to seek the solitude of the desert; virgins subdued the desires of the flesh and emulated on earth the purity of the angels. The capital importance of salvation, fully considered and understood, has raised some souls to an even more heroic degree of virtue. It has produced the grandest and most heroic activity in the Church, the apostolate. Let us admire that numerous army of priests and popes who have not been satisfied to work zealously for their own salvation but have eagerly devoted themselves to procure the same blessing for their brethren.

Let us bless the principle and source of this zeal, our Lord Jesus Christ, and ask him to give us the grace to understand as they so well understood the supreme importance of salvation so that, like them, we may work for it generously and perseveringly.

II. Considerations

Inspired by these thoughts, let us consider that the salvation of our immortal souls is a work to which we must: 1. subordinate everything, and 2. if need be, sacrifice everything.

1. *It is a work to which I must subordinate everything.* This is to give it the first place in my estimation, to make it the principal object of my activity, to place this great business above every other affair. It is evident that salvation deserves this preference and that nothing on earth should concern me more; for it is my most sacred duty and most precious interest.

It is my most sacred duty. But what is duty? It is the fulfillment of God's holy will; it is the adaptation of my life to the plan that God proposed to realize when he created me. Now salvation is the first end that he had in view in the work of creation. Such is likewise the end that he gives me to attain, not forced and constrained by necessity, but by the exercise of my free will.

I can, it is true, neglect my salvation. I can propose another end to myself, place some specious good above the supreme Good. By

this unreasonable preference, however, I abuse my free will and violate the most fundamental law of my nature; I disregard the rule of duty.

It is also my most precious interest. It is essentially personal, for its immediate object is my happiness or my suffering. The loss or gain will be mine, and mine alone.

It is so important as to surpass every other interest. What, then, is at stake! On one hand, supreme bliss, the joy and delights of heaven, the possession of the sovereign Good; on the other hand, the frightful sufferings, despair, and torments of hell. What are all the interests of earth compared with these?

What makes this consideration still more striking is that the awful alternative is everlasting. On earth everything comes to an end. But in the next life, our lot, happy or unhappy, when once determined, will remain the same for ever. *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*[1]

Salvation is my last end, to which all my efforts should be directed, the definite purpose that I should have in all my works. It is the view-point from which I should judge the value of things and the esteem to be attached

[1] MARK 8^{37}

to them. If it is my last end, everything else must be only means to its attainment. But the value of the means depends entirely on their more or less perfect adaptation to the end. "Of what use," one of the saints used to say, "will this object, this action, this preoccupation, this interest be for eternal life?" This is the only true rule of Christian life. *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Faith teaches me that in the designs of Providence all the events of my life are as so many means to the attainment of my eternal salvation. The happy or unhappy events of my life, the works to which I devote myself, my social relations, business affairs, even my recreations can lead me towards that end. I ought to make all these things converge towards my salvation. Indeed, everything in my life that does not, in some way, refer to it, is a work without a purpose, altogether unworthy of a rational creature and above all of a Christian. *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

2. *My salvation is a work to which I must, if need be, sacrifice everything.* It is clear that salvation is not only my most important, but my only real interest in life.

Suppose that here below I should be the

most wretched of men, suppose every conceivable misfortune should befall me, yet if, after suffering all this I should be so fortunate as to save my soul, what would a few days passed in sadness and tears signify compared with a joyful eternity of bliss? And if, instead of having salvation to crown my life, I should be condemned to eternal punishment, what will it profit me to have passed my earthly days in abundance and pleasures?

There is nothing here below that I should not be ready to sacrifice for the sake of my salvation. To attain salvation many of the saints gave up their lives. All of them practice the most generous and heroic renunciation, but they found the precious pearl of God's kingdom and did not hesitate to give up everything else to acquire it. *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, how little these truths are esteemed and how many persons behave as if they had no knowledge of them! Though shrewd and far-sighted in everything else they seem to

be attacked with an incurable blindness when their eternal salvation is concerned.

And how about myself? In spite of abundant graces and so many exhortations, have I not to reproach myself on this score? Is salvation really and actually the great and only affair of my life, the principal object of my concern? Is it from the point of view of salvation that I form my appreciation of everything?

This is indeed the general end that I desire, that I hope to attain. But am I in truth making generous efforts for its attainment? While I exercise so much zeal in the pursuit of trifling interests, am I not generally slow and negligent when my salvation is concerned? Then, too, in the details of my life how many acts relate to salvation only remotely, how many have no reference to it whatever?

O my God, before all else, I wish to save my soul. This will be my thought, my preoccupation all the time, the end that I will propose and keep before me in all my undertakings. I will work for my salvation *constantly*, renewing daily the resolution to apply myself to this purpose; *assiduously*, neglecting no means of sanctification that Providence furnishes; *generously*, overcoming all weakness of nature

and courageously making every sacrifice that God will ask of me.

I resolve therefore:

1. To consider frequently the supreme importance of saving my soul;

2. In every decision to take the point of view of my salvation.

What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul?[1]

VIII

THE EVIL OF MORTAL SIN

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God who is pleased to be called the "Holy One." We will adore also the most complete manifestation of his holiness in our Lord Jesus Christ. We will honor the saints, those especially who committed sin but afterwards became illustrious by their sincere repentance.

II. Considering sin in its hideous reality, we shall see that:

1. *It is a shameful degradation.* It depraves the intellect by making it an instrument of error. It depraves the heart by debasing it in gross

[1] MARK 8^{36}

pleasures. It depraves the will by subjecting it to blind and brutal passion.

2. *Sin is an outrage against God.* It is disobedience to our absolute Master, ingratitude to our greatest benefactor, and contempt for the Almighty.

III. We will regret not having always realized that sin is the only real evil. We will ask the grace to appreciate its odious character and henceforth to pursue it without relaxation.

We will resolve:

1. To recall our sins;

2. To set about expiating them by penance;

3. To be on our guard so as to avoid another fall.

Flee from sins as from the face of a serpent: for if thou comest near them, they will take hold of thee.

I. Adoration

God is holiness itself. Not only can sin have no place in him, not only is he perfect in all his works, but his will is the absolute rule to which every created will must conform or else fall. When he wished to impress his law upon the Jews he urged his holiness as the great motive. *Be ye holy, because I the Lord your God am holy.*[1] *Holy is his name,*[2] our blessed

[1] Lev. 1[2]

[2] Luke 1[34]

mother said in the words of the *Magnificat.* Let us adore this holiness of God, this infinite purity, so essentially opposed to sin and to all that approaches sin.

After contemplating holiness and adoring it in its source, let us adore its most complete manifestation in Jesus, the Word incarnate, the great high Priest, innocent, pure, separated from sinners; in Mary, his immaculate virgin mother; and in the saints, who were indeed subject to the law of sin and unable to keep themselves completely free from its stain; but they fought it with generosity and wept bitter tears when they had the misfortune of falling into it. Let us honor especially St. Peter, St. Augustine and all the others in whom the hatred of sin and regret for having committed it produced such admirable results and whom the Church holds up as models of repentance.

Let us ask God through their intercession to give us the grace that, like them, we may understand the evil of sin, conceive a supreme horror for it, and consecrate the rest of our lives to expiate the sins that we have unfortunately committed.

II. Considerations

Sin often appears to us as something attractive, pleasant, and delicious. Let us deprive it of this advantage; let us raise the false mask that conceals its ugliness and consider its hideous reality.

1. *Mortal sin is a shameful depravity.* Every living being is created for some special end or purpose, toward which it should direct its activity; and it increases in perfection according as it approaches that end more closely. The sinful soul, instead of tending towards its perfection, uses the liberty that God has given it only to lower and degrade itself. Let us reflect on some of the degradations that result from sin, or rather that constitute it.

The intellect is depraved by mortal sin. It is the glory and perfection of this noble faculty to know the truth. But the sinner freely and voluntarily turns it into an instrument of error. He turns away from the light that illumines his mind.

The heart is depraved by mortal sin. God has made the heart of man for himself. He wants to be the object of man's love and, by drawing his creatures to himself, to elevate them, ennoble them, and make them happy.

The sinner forgets this great prerogative and gives his heart to the enjoyment of gross pleasures which he is willing to substitute for the supreme Good. Thus he debases and dishonors himself.

The will is depraved by mortal sin. It is the law and perfection of the rational will to conform its acts to the divine law of duty. The sinner perverts this faculty whenever he subjects it to a blind and brutal passion.

So it is that a sinner surrenders his dignity of man and despoils himself of his noblest prerogatives just to satisfy the inordinate ambition of pride and the desires of the senses.

2. *Mortal sin is an outrage against God.* Sin outrages God in three ways: it is disobedience, ingratitude, and contempt.

Sin is disobedience. It is our sacred and inviolable duty to submit to God in everything that he commands, for he is the absolute Master, the supreme Legislator, the principle and source of all authority. His will, inspired and directed by an infinite wisdom, is the law that should govern all our acts.

But the sinner refuses just submission to God and says to him: *I will not serve.*[1] This feeble creature, whom God could annihilate by

[1] JER. 2^{20}

a single word and whom death will soon bring to the feet of the supreme Judge, this creature dares to set his perverse, ephemeral, little will in opposition to the will of the Almighty.

In the second place, the sinner outrages God *by ingratitude.* Not only is God our sovereign Lord and Master, but he is also the most generous of benefactors. Whatever we possess comes from him, the infinite source of all good. *Every best gift,* says St. James, *is from above.*[1] If, like the laborer in the vineyard, we should be told: *Take what is thine, and go thy way,*[2] we would have left nothing at all.

It is against such a benefactor that the sinner directs his outrages. Hands filled with beneficent gifts he insults and blasphemes. He would feel obliged to offer some expression of gratitude to the most ordinary benefactor. But when God is concerned, the sinner frees himself from this sacred law. In fact it is towards his most generous and unselfish benefactor that the sinner is guilty of ingratitude, a vice that the world itself condemns as mean, low and unworthy.

Mortal sin shows *contempt* for the Almighty. If we fathom the depths of mortal sin and the awful malice that constitutes it, we shall

[1] JAMES 1[17]
[2] MATT. 20[14]

see that its fundamental characteristic, what makes it essentially an evil, is the unjust or rather monstrous preference of a creature to the uncreated, of the imperfect to the Perfect, of finite being to God.

When enticed by this double attraction, what does the sinner do? He becomes the victim of a deplorable blindness. He turns away from God and welcomes the creature. We are justly indignant over the Jews' preference of the malefactor, Barabbas, to Jesus, their Savior; *Not this man, but Barabbas*,[1] they cried. The same outrage is renewed every time we have the misfortune to commit a mortal sin. We prefer Barabbas to Jesus, our Master, our blessedness, our friend.

III. Acts and Resolutions

Sin, my God, is a great evil, the only real evil. Indeed, outside of sin, whatever we call evil is so only in appearance; by making good use of it we can turn it into something good, so only sin ought to be hated and detested.

Are these the feelings that animate me? Up to the present have I formed a true idea of sin? Am I thoroughly convinced that nothing on earth deserves my hatred more than mortal sin? What impression does the remembrance

[1] John 18[40]

of my sins produce upon me? Does it inspire me with a salutary horror? And what have I done to expiate them?

My Jesus, arouse in me the sentiments that inspired thy attitude toward sin. Enlighten my soul so that I may understand the depths of the evil that sin involves, and the odious character that makes it an object of abomination in thy sight. Above all, pour down thy grace upon me that I may detest all sin, that I may deeply regret having ever committed sin and may henceforth close my heart against it.

Thou callest me to share thy priesthood, to enjoy the honor of uniting my efforts to thine, to fight against the tyrannical empire of sin in the world, to drive it forth from the souls of men, and to inspire them with a dread of it. Sin therefore must be my irreconcilable enemy. It is thus I will henceforth consider it. But if I have been so blind or so guilty as to allow myself to be seduced by its deceptive attractions, I wish to pursue it relentlessly both in myself and in others. And I shall be happy if by zealous efforts I can repair the glory that I have taken from thee by committing sin.

I resolve therefore:

1. To make an act of contrition at the recollection of my past sins;

2. To expiate them by penance, and for this purpose to offer to God whatever sacrifices may present themselves;

3. To be always vigilant so as to fortify myself against another fall.

Flee from sins as from the face of a serpent; for if thou comest near them, they will take hold of thee.[1]

IX

THE STATE OF A SOUL IN MORTAL SIN

SUMMARY

I. We will contemplate the bitter agony of our Savior in the Garden. Its cause was the burden of our sins and the sight of our ingratitude. We will compassionate the grief that our sins brought upon his sacred heart.

II. To realize the condition of a soul in the state of mortal sin, we will consider the analogy between the effects of death on the body and mortal sin on the soul.

1. *Mortal sin distorts the features of the soul.* The innocent soul is beautiful and pleasing in the sight of God; but sin disfigures it.

2. *Mortal sin makes the soul insensible.* It drives out the life of grace. The most precious faculties

[1] Eccl. 21[2]

of the soul are paralyzed. So it perceives the things of God very imperfectly.

3. *Mortal sin makes the soul inert.* It destroys the power of meritorious activity. The functions of the soul become, as it were, inert and lifeless.

4. *Mortal sin corrupts the soul.* A mysterious power for evil and a growing tendency to sin develop within the soul.

5. *Mortal sin produces a sort of infection in the soul.* Like a foul and contagious odor, it rises from the soul of a sinner, betraying the presence of spiritual depravity.

III. We will acknowledge that sin is our irreconcilable enemy. We will listen to our Lord exhorting us to watch and pray against temptation, and will regret our lack of vigilance and prayerfulness in the past.

We will resolve:

1. To realize more fully that there is no greater evil than sin;

2. To watch constantly over our thoughts and our senses, the ordinary sources of temptation.

It is an evil and a bitter thing for thee, to have left the Lord thy God.

I. Adoration

I will go in spirit to the Garden of Olives and contemplate the bitter agony of my Savior on the night before he died. I see about him

neither the cross nor other instruments of his passion. There is no crowd of spectators; not even one of his disciples is at his side, nor has he the consoling presence of his beloved mother. He is alone. In the awful silence, he begins to *grow sorrowful and to be sad.*[1] In the depths of this most painful agony, he prays and weeps, he weeps and prays. Grief gives way to anguish of soul. *And being in an agony, he prayed the longer. And his sweat became as drops of blood, trickling down upon the ground.*[2] His soul was *sorrowful even unto death.*[3] *And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.*[4]

When seeking the cause of the agony in the Garden of Gethsemani, let us not think to find it only in Christ's foreknowledge of the cruel sufferings of Good Friday. It was the burden of our sins that weighed him down; it was the sight of our ingratitude that made him weep. He endured his agony to expiate our iniquity, to atone for our offenses.

At the feet of Jesus, our divine Redeemer, let us compassionate the grief that our sins caused his sacred heart. Let us thank him for

[1] MATT. 26[37]
[2] LUKE 22[43–44]
[3] MATT. 26[38]
[4] LUKE 22[43]

having become, out of love for us, a victim of expiation, thereby satisfying the justice of an offended God. Do thou, O Jesus, our Lord and our God, make us feel the gravity of sin, help us to understand the frightful condition of a soul in mortal sin, and enable us to share that detestation of sin which thou didst experience in thy bloody agony.

II. Considerations

To the eyes of the world, the saint and the sinner may appear the same, the man black with crime and the one possessing a clean conscience may seem equally fair and worthy. But in the sight of God how different they really are! If we were permitted to contemplate a soul in mortal sin, we would be horrified at the sight. Mortal sin is so named because it brings about the death of the soul, because its effects on the soul are so much like the results of death on our physical organism.

1. *Mortal sin distorts the features of the soul.* When life has gone out from the body, the sight is extinguished, a livid pallor succeeds the color that gave expression to the living countenance, the face, contracted and dis-

torted, loses its grace and beauty. Such are some of the changes produced by death in the body. But the death of the soul is more dreadful: an immortal soul, which should reflect God's own beauty, is disfigured.

Look at the soul stained by grievous sin. Its whole being is altered, so that it no longer reflects the image of its Maker; the clouded intellect exercises but imperfect sway over its actions.

2. *Mortal sin makes the soul insensible.* When life has gone out from the body, all the sense organs become inactive; the eye no longer sees, the ear is deaf to every sound, the nose is indifferent to the sweetest perfumes. External objects continue to act on the lifeless body which, however, is not aware of their presence.

A like insensibility overcomes the soul when mortal sin has driven out the life of grace. In the state of grace, the soul has, so to speak, sight and hearing to contemplate God and to perceive his voice. It is attracted to him by the charm of his divine perfections. And moreover it feels the action of his grace and the influence of his inspirations.

The corruption of sin afflicts and paralyses these inestimable powers. True, they are not destroyed, for the soul in the state of sin is

still able in the spiritual order to see, hear, and feel; but they are weakened. No longer do they possess that delicacy and susceptibility which enable the pure spotless soul to discern the slightest inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

3. *Mortal sin makes the soul inert.* After death the organs of the body, benumbed and cold, are incapable of further functioning, the muscles lose their power of activity. The feet do not walk, the arms lie motionless, the tongue can no longer speak, the eye is fixed and without expression, the heart fails to act.

Now, when we have sinned, we continue, indeed, to exercise our natural faculties; we can even perform good acts in the supernatural order. But these acts have no merit for eternal life. They are dead, as it were, and we will never be rewarded for them. Our soul, in the state of mortal sin, is incapable of meritorious activity. The functions and powers of the soul, so to speak, are inert and useless so long as we remain in that state.

4. *Mortal sin corrupts the soul.* After death the body at once starts to decay; a fermentation begins among its elements, disorganizing and reducing them to a shapeless mass of putridity the very sight of which fills us with horror and disgust.

But the ravages of mortal sin in the soul are

no less terrible. A mysterious power for evil and a growing tendency to sin develop within it. Its passions are unbridled. Its evil concupiscences, its bad inclinations that grace had calmed and subdued seem to be aroused and active. Temptations from without are no less violent while the will, enfeebled more and more, no longer has the same strength to resist them effectually.

5. *Mortal sin produces a sort of infection in the soul.* From the soul of a sinner it rises like a foul and contagious odor. Holiness exhales a perfume that is sweet and pleasant. Just so, sin has its infectious emanations that spread corruption all about it. This is why Holy Writ compares sinners to an open sepulchre that gives forth an odor of death. Who has not met some men so completely abandoned to vice that everything about them reveals the depravity of their heart? Not only their words, but the very expression of their face betrays the sinful soul within. So, after sin has exercised its ravages in the soul and depraved its inclinations, it begins to manifest itself beyond and to produce around the sinner an atmosphere of death that makes his very approach sepulchral.

III. Acts and Resolutions

Sin, O my God, is not only thy enemy but also mine, an enemy the more to be feared, since against its repeated attacks I have only a weak and hesitating will with which to resist. How greatly therefore it concerns me to fortify myself against the danger of yielding to its powers! I will use the means which thou dost point out, watchfulness and prayer.

If in the past I had been more vigilant, if I had prayed more fervently, how many falls, that I must now regret, would have been avoided! But henceforth I will conceive a deeper hatred for sin and regard it as the most dreadful evil that can befall me.

Divine Master, arouse these dispositions in me. I understand the need of them but without thy help they will not penetrate my soul. Despite the ugliness of sin, despite the evils that follow in its train, it still has attractions for me. To fly from it I have to struggle against my own evil tendencies. *O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me.*[1] Preserve in my soul the precious treasure of thy grace.

[1] Ps. 69[2]

I resolve:

1. To realize more fully that there is no greater evil than sin;

2. Often to ask for the grace to avoid mortal sin;

3. To watch constantly over my thoughts and my senses, the ordinary sources of my temptations.

It is an evil and a bitter thing for thee, to have left the Lord thy God.[1]

X

THE PUNISHMENT OF MORTAL SIN

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God, irreconcilable in his hatred of sin. God is love; but he can not love iniquity. We will acknowledge the perfect justice of God's judgments against sin. And we will ask God to implant in us that same aversion for evil.

II. We will consider three most striking scenes of God's unalterable hatred for sin.

1. *The Garden of Eden.* We will picture the innocence and happiness of our first parents, their subsequent sin, and its terrible consequences.

[1] JER. 2^{19}

2. *Hell.* An eternity of hopeless separation from God! And for what? For mortal sin. We will realize more fully that there is a hell, that its indescribable torments are never ending and justly proportioned to the gravity of our sins.

3. *Calvary.* Man could not repair the offense against God's majesty. To expiate mortal sin, the very Son of God endured most violent suffering. We will contemplate the crowning act of this expiation, his cruel death on the cross.

III. Appreciating the incalculable enormity of sin from the severity of its punishment, we will detest it as the greatest evil and will realize the necessity of making atonement for our own past sins. We will ask for the grace to strengthen our hatred for sin.

We will resolve: 1. Often to make an act of contrition upon recalling our past sins; 2. To offer some little sacrifice to God in expiation.

Sin, when it is completed, begetteth death.

They that commit sin and iniquity are enemies to their own soul.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God irreconcilable in his hatred of sin. God is love. He loves all the works of his hands, from the humblest to the most perfect, since they are the reflection of his beauty, the expression of his wisdom. Above

all, he loves the souls of men. Sin alone he can not love as it is directly opposed to his divine will. Perhaps nothing will better enable us to realize its incalculable malice than a consideration of its punishment. While God is infinitely just, still we doubt not that even in the capacity of sovereign judge mercy tempers his justice.

Let us then endeavor to realize the perfect justice of God's judgments and dispositions. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to impart to us that aversion and hatred for sin which will ever enable us like the saints to strive courageously against it whether in ourselves or in others.

II. Considerations

Let us consider three scenes of God's hatred for sin.

1. *The Garden of Eden.* Let us go back in spirit to the time of man's creation. When our first parents came from the hand of God, they were innocent and happy, endowed with numberless gifts, and surrounded with the pleasures of an earthly paradise. There was no sickness to be endured, no bad inclinations to combat, no suffering or pain of any

kind; in short, there was no evil in the world, but all was pleasing in the sight of God. Adam and his posterity were to continue in the enjoyment of this unalloyed happiness on one condition, a condition imposed on them as a pledge of their obedience. But they dared to disobey the command of the almighty Creator; and behold the consequences! The punishment their disobedience merited was not long delayed. We feel its effects even now, as will the sons of Adam till remotest posterity. Guilty and filled with remorse, Adam and Eve realized their sinfulness and thought to hide from the eye of God. They could not escape his sentence and, ignominiously deprived of their earthly paradise, they were condemned to pass a wretched and toilsome existence upon the earth, a life full of trials and difficulties which death alone would end. Such was God's decree against the first violation of his divine will, and we know with what inexorable severity it is still carried out. Thus are the words of Holy Writ constantly verified: *Man born of a woman, living for a short time, is filled with many miseries.*[1] What calamities and disasters, what social degradations and corrup-

[1] JOB 14[1]

tions, have visited the earth since man's first fall.

What physical and moral sufferings have afflicted humanity! Wars and pestilence and famine have desolated the earth and made the story of the human race one long record of distress. Alongside the series of public calamities, let us place the unrecorded griefs of private life, the many sorrows endured in the silence and secrecy of the heart. All these are the result of sin. *By one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death.*[1] No doubt, even here below, sin is visited with far-reaching penalties, but the judgment of God reserves for the hereafter a punishment far more terrible.

2. *Hell.* An eternity of suffering indescribable, an eternity of despair, an eternity of hopeless separation from their Creator and Redeemer, an eternity in the society of the reprobate! And for what? For mortal sin. If we wish to understand the heinousness of sin and how greatly we should abhor it, we must descend in thought to the depths of hell, listen to the cries of rage and despair of the damned: then let us reflect that their suffer-

[1] Rom. 5[12]

ings must continue forever; that one day, if we commit mortal sin and persevere therein, we will have to join their company.

Between sin and hell there is necessarily an intimate connection. Mortal sin, if not effaced on earth by tears of repentance, will be forever punished in the life to come. Faith teaches me this truth which human reason, by introducing objections and sophisms, vainly tries to obscure and reject.

There is a hell, an everlasting existence where God punishes the unrepentant sinner. In his infinite wisdom he has compared the sufferings in hell with the evil of sin, and has found no disproportion. Could he be deceived in establishing this balance, or would he with undue severity punish sin more than it deserves? Who would dare utter such blasphemies? Let us rather conclude that since proportionate punishments are reserved for sins by an infinitely good and just God, it must be that sin has degrees and depths of evil that we can not now completely realize, which only God's wisdom can fully appreciate.

3. *Calvary.* While the torments of hell punish, they cannot expiate sin. To accomplish this the humiliation of an infinite being was necessary. As sovereign judge, God might

have abandoned man to his reprobate condition; he might have left him to eke out here below a miserable existence ending in death, which would but mark the beginning of a still more wretched eternity.

God, however, willed it otherwise. His mercy found a Redeemer for us in the person of his own Son, the divine Word consubstantial with the Father, who, descending to earth, assumed our human flesh and offered to his heavenly Father a worthy and sufficient expiation, which we were powerless to accomplish. Man could in no way repair the offense which sin had offered to God's majesty.

To understand at what cost his mission was accomplished, we must pause not at the astonishing humiliation of the crib nor at the poverty and obscurity of Nazareth nor yet at the labors and fatigues and struggles of our Savior's public life, but we must gaze upon the supreme immolation with which the God-Man crowned his earthly pilgrimage. We must contemplate his pitiful agony in the Garden, his ignominious and painful crowning with thorns; we must follow the footsteps of Jesus as he advanced under the heavy burden of the cross; we must behold the awful crucifixion.

As these scenes of desolation are unfolded

before our eyes, let us reflect that he who willed to endure all this suffering is the God whom we adore and who out of love for us was willing to undergo death, even the death of the cross. *Christ hath redeemed us,* says St. Paul, *from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written: Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

Whatever point of view I take, my God, I can not but see the incalculable enormity of sin, thy enemy and mine. Nothing better enables me to appreciate this than a consideration of the severe punishment and the countless miseries which it entails. If sin deserves such chastisements, if the eternal suffering of hell does not expiate it, if to satisfy thy justice and atone for sin, thy divine Son gave up his life on the cross, with what horror, O my God, it should inspire me!

May I then hate and detest sin as the greatest of all evils; may I willingly undergo any suffering rather than commit sin! But this is not sufficient. Perhaps I have already been

[1] Gal. 3[13]

so unfortunate as to have fallen into grievous sin; and what atonement have I offered to God?

My God, dissipate my deplorable blindness. Thou hast enabled me to understand, to some extent, the enormity of sin; fill my soul with sincere repentance for those which I have committed. Give me the grace to accept in expiation for my many transgressions all the pains and sufferings, all the trials and crosses of life, especially those attendant upon the fulfillment of my daily obligations.

I resolve therefore:

1. Often to make an act of contrition upon recalling my past sins;

2. During this very day, to offer to God some little sacrifice in expiation of my sins.

Sin, when it is completed, begetteth death.[1]

They that commit sin and iniquity, are enemies to their own soul.[2]

XI

THE SIN OF A PRIEST

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God as we behold him pronouncing anathemas against unfaithful priests of the Old

[1] JAMES 1[15]

[2] TOBIAS 12[10]

Law. What must be his displeasure with a sinful priest of the New Covenant? We will adore the freedom from sin in our Lord Jesus Christ, the model of priests. We will ask for the grace to share this exemption.

II. We will consider the evil of sin in a priest.

1. *Its intrinsic nature.* It is a violation of the sacred engagement made in ordination and a profanation of the sacerdotal character. The priest, as the sworn enemy of sin, should not submit to the foe whose kingdom he has engaged to destroy.

2. *Its circumstances.* Ignorance may partly excuse a sinful layman. Not so with the priest. He has drunk often and deep at the well of sacred science. The priest also receives special and numerous graces from God to help him resist temptation.

3. *Its consequences.* For the priest himself: he abuses the grace of God and so receives it less abundantly. For the souls entrusted to his care: by negligence and want of zeal he wrecks the souls of many entrusted to his care. When his sin is made public, the priesthood is further dishonored and religion insulted.

III. We will reflect that priests can and do fall from the sanctity of their calling and we will fear for ourselves. We will ask for the grace to persevere in the faithful service of Jesus Christ.

We will resolve:

1. To try to realize the sinless holiness of the priesthood;

2. Never to ascend the altar with a heart stained by sin;

3. To strive to preserve a great delicacy of conscience.

In the land of the saints he hath done wicked things, and he shall not see the glory of the Lord.

I will wash my hands among the innocent; and will compass thy altar, O Lord.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God as we behold him pronouncing anathemas through the mouths of his prophets against the priests of the Old Law who betrayed their sacred trust and disregarded the holiness of a ministry which they dishonored by their excesses. *And now, O ye priests, this commandment is to you. If you will not hear, and if you will not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, saith the Lord of hosts: I will send poverty upon you, and will curse your blessings. . . . I have no pleasure in you . . . and I will not receive a gift of your hand.*[1]

What must be God's displeasure with a priest of the New Covenant, whose character is infinitely more sacred and whose office more august, when he is so unfortunate as to abandon himself to sin and, in the words of the prophet, commits iniquity in the land of the

[1] Mal. 1[10], 2[1–2]

saints. Let us acknowledge that God, who is infinitely holy, can admit to the service of his altar only holy ministers, ministers free from sin.

Let us adore this freedom from sin in our Lord Jesus Christ, the model of priests. *For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*[1] Let us ask the grace to share this exemption; and in view of the eminent dignity of our priesthood, let us conceive that deep hatred, that detestation for sin which all holy priests have cherished.

II. Considerations

As the sin of a Christian is more grievous than that of an infidel, so the sin of a priest is greater than that of a layman. The special evil of a priest's sin consists in: 1. *its intrinsic nature;* 2. *the circumstances;* 3. *the consequences.*

1. *The intrinsic nature of a priest's sin.* The sin of a priest considered in itself is a viola-

[1] Heb. 7[26]

tion of the sacred engagement made in ordination. When receiving tonsure he renounced the world and took God for his portion. *The Lord is the portion of my inheritance.*[1] In holy orders he renewed this contract, thus rendering it more inviolable. But the sinful priest retracts, so to speak, this offering of himself to God.

Another characteristic of a priest's sin is the profanation of the sacerdotal character. At his ordination the priest is solemnly sanctified and consecrated, he is set apart from the things of earth and adorned with a divine character; our Lord communicates to him his own priestly dignity and powers, raising him above the angels and making him another Christ.

The sinful priest not only profanes his sacred character, but perverts the object for which the priesthood was intended, namely, the establishing of God's kingdom in the souls of men by the destruction of sin. Thus by his very character, the priest is the enemy of sin. In the eyes of the world he is the representative of all that is good, pure, and holy, the adversary of evil, no matter what form or what proportions it may assume. Since the

[1] Ps. 15[5]

world holds the priest and his mission in such high esteem, and rightly so, it is not surprising that men are scandalized when the representative of Christ, forgetting his sublime and glorious calling, submits to the enemy whose kingdom he has engaged to destroy.

2. *The circumstances of a priest's sin.* Two circumstances, namely his greater enlightenment and his more numerous graces especially augment the evil of a priest's sin.

We may safely surmise that for many of the laity who fall, ignorance will prove at least a partial excuse before the tribunal of God. Absorbed by temporal affairs and not deeply instructed in the things of eternity, they are but imperfectly aware of the malice of sin.

Not so with the priest. He has drunk often and deep at the well of sacred science. The holy Word of God, spiritual writings, and the teachings of theology, have dispelled his ignorance of God's law, have made him aware of the obligation and reward of submission, the guilt and punishment of violation. More guilt, therefore, attaches to the fall of a priest than to that of a less favored layman.

Besides the light of knowledge, the priest receives many special helps from God, enabling him to resist sinful temptations success-

fully. *God is faithful*, says St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, *who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able.*[1] This divine assistance, accorded to all, is given in such greater abundance to the priest that his sins are absolutely inexcusable. There are external graces coming from the surroundings of his life, his daily occupations, the functions of his ministry. And there are internal graces giving him an attraction for what is good and a horror for evil, directing his will toward God.

3. *The consequences of a priest's sin.*

First, *for the priest himself.* In yielding to temptation, the priest abuses the light of the soul; God punishes him by spiritual blindness; he resists divine grace; it is no longer accorded him in the same measure. Gradually his conscience becomes less sensitive, and sin no longer frightens or disturbs him. In this way he may go on from sin to sin, heaping profanation upon profanation, until eventually he becomes impenitent, when little less than a miracle of God's grace can save him.

In the second place, the priest's sin is often fatal not only to himself but also to many of *the souls entrusted to his care.* As the faithful

[1] I Cor. 10[13]

priest by precept and example leads many souls to God, so his sinful brother by negligence and want of zeal for his holy ministry can not but wreck the souls of many coming under his influence. For how can a sinful guide of souls be solicitous for the salvation of others, when he has no care for his own?

If such are the consequences of a priest's secret sin, how much greater must they be when the sin is made public? To the loss of his own prestige and the contempt that will fall upon him, there must be added the dishonor to the priesthood and the insult to religion. Honored and glorified by the virtues of her priests, Christ's spouse, our holy mother the Church, incurs only shame and confusion when one of them fails to appreciate the dignity and holiness of his sacred calling.

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, how does it happen that thy priests, thy chosen ones, marked with such an august character, called to exercise such a sublime ministry, and enriched with so many graces —how does it happen that they can fall from the height of sanctity to which they have

been elevated by thy divine grace? While the priesthood has ever been marked by the eminent holiness of so many of its members in its ranks there have always been unworthy, sinful priests.

I too, like some of my fellow priests, though called to thy holy ministry, to show others the way to salvation, might fall into sin unless sustained by thy divine assistance; I too might be numbered among those who have been unfaithful, who have betrayed their trust.

Never permit such a misfortune to befall me, O my Savior! Grant that I may never, like Judas, become a traitor in thy service, thy unfaithful disciple; but may I rather say with thy apostle Paul, *I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[1]

I resolve therefore:

1. To try to realize the holiness of the priestly character and the sinlessness that belongs to it;

[1] Rom. 8[38–39]

2. Never to ascend thine altar with a heart stained by sin;

3. To strive to preserve a great delicacy of conscience.

In the land of the saints he hath done wicked things, and he shall not see the glory of the Lord.[1]

I will wash my hands among the innocent and will compass Thy altar, O Lord.[2]

XII

VENIAL SIN

SUMMARY

I. We will adore the perfect holiness of God, who detests all sin. And we will honor Mary Immaculate, the only sinless one of all mankind.

II. We should make every effort to avoid the slightest faults. To convince ourselves more completely of this truth, we will consider:

1. *The evil of venial sin.* It is far worse than many so called evils. And God detests it. In a venial sin, when sufficiently deliberate, we find all that constitutes a moral disorder. How deplorable it is in the soul of a priest!

2. *The effects of venial sin.* It weakens our love

[1] Ps. 26[10]
[2] Ps. 25[6]

for God and deprives us of many graces. It is an obstacle to fervent prayer and hinders perfect peace in the soul. In a priest it diminishes zeal for souls.

3. *Its relation to mortal sin.* Although these two kinds of sin are distinct, yet they have the same principle, and it is often impossible to point out the limits that separate them. Habits of venial sin lead to mortal.

III. We will see that, although we have renounced mortal sin for a long time, yet it is not so with venial sin. Our hearts, while not entirely attached to creatures, are not entirely given to God. We will ask the Blessed Virgin to obtain for us the grace to participate in the spotless purity that was her privilege.

We will resolve:

1. At our confessions to detest venial sin;
2. To repent of those we commit;
3. To see that no inordinate attachment remains in us.

Grieve not the holy Spirit of God.

Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.

I. Adoration

Let us adore the perfect holiness of God, who detests sin which has spread over the earth like a vast deluge. The life of a man, polluted at the very source, continues amid countless iniquities and falls. While there are some just men who have remained faithful to

God, yet even in these holy souls sin has gained admission. Their sanctity is not perfect.

Only Mary, the blessed Mother of God, the single exception of all mankind, was pure in her very conception and remained immaculate during her whole life; her sojourn on earth was like a cloudless sky, like a white lily without spot. Even venial sin, however slight, was banished from her heart. Her soul, all pure and holy, belonged entirely to God.

Let us thank the Holy Spirit for having preserved his chaste spouse from every taint of evil, thus giving us a model of perfect holiness in a fellow-creature. In union with the Church, let us acknowledge Mary's spotless innocence from the very moment of her conception.

II. Considerations

Absolute exemption from all sin, even venial, is a special privilege to which none of us can pretend. Yet we ought to make every effort to avoid the slightest faults. We ought to conceive that salutary dread of committing venial sin which is the first powerful aid to holiness. Among the many motives that should induce us to avoid venial sin, let us consider three:

1. *The evil of venial sin.* However slight it

may be, it is truly an evil, so iniquitous that God is implacable in his hatred towards it, and no one can enter heaven until thoroughly purified from its stain. The evil of venial sin is far worse than many so-called evils. If we should judge things according to truth and reason, we would readily accept great privation and suffering, we would submit to every sacrifice rather than commit one of these sins which we scarcely notice, such as waste of time, sensuality, self-love, voluntary distraction at prayer, faults against charity, inordinate attachment to creatures and things of earth. In each of these faults, when sufficiently deliberate, we find all that constitutes a moral disorder, namely, disobedience towards God, contempt for his majesty, and the abuse of his abundant gifts, natural and supernatural, so generously showered upon us.

If such is the disorder of venial sin considered in itself, what must it be in a soul called to perfection, especially in the soul of a priest which ought to be pure as the angels in heaven! *Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord; or who shall stand in his holy place?* says the psalmist; *The innocent in hands, and clean of heart.*[1] And we have the words of

[1] Ps. 23[3-4]

our divine Lord himself: *Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.*[1]

2. *Its effects.* In the first place, it weakens our love for God, that charity which is our spiritual life and which makes us holy and pleasing in the sight of God. The soul which has fallen into habits of venial sin has not lost all this, it is true, but its spiritual life languishes; it loses strength and almost the power of activity.

Furthermore, venial sin deprives us of many graces and holy inspirations, and it weakens our good inclinations. Besides reducing the number of supernatural communications with which God is disposed to favor us, it is an obstacle to that intimate and perfect union with God brought about by prayer. The pure soul is elevated to God as if by a natural activity and feels the consolations of God. Meditation it finds easy and attractive. Grace enters it as easily as light penetrates a transparent crystal. On the other hand, a soul wrapt up in the love of created things, if it does not find prayer impossible, at least never reaches a high degree of prayer; the intellect is not sufficiently clear nor the heart sufficiently disengaged.

[1] MATT. 5[48]

For a priest, venial sin has a still more harmful effect. By making him fall away from the eminent holiness to which he is called, it weakens his love for souls as well as his love for God. How will he love souls, how will he be zealous for their sanctification, if he neglects his own, if nothing short of mortal sin can stop him? Will the priest who has formed habits of venial sin devote himself unreservedly to the work of the ministry? On the contrary, will he not prefer to gratify his whims and inordinate attachments, yield to pride and ease and human respect rather than sacrifice himself for the sake of immortal souls? A soul attached to venial sin will never be the soul of an apostle.

3. *Its relation to mortal sin.* Of course there is a distinction; but they are related as death is to the disease that leads to it. They both spring from the same root, are the fruit of the same tree. The principle of both is found, not in reason, which God has given us to enlighten and direct our will, but in the grosser and depraved instincts sprung from original sin, the source of all our depravity.

The resemblance between venial and mortal sin is so close that we can scarcely point out the limits that separate them. Indeed

the essential difference between them is one of the difficult problems of Theology. So in actual practice it is often extremely difficult to determine whether a fault is grievous or venial: hence the deplorable illusion of many souls that judge as venial what in reality and before God is mortal,—souls that live in the unfortunate state of mortal sin but without remorse. It is so easy to neglect the distinction.

There is an intimate connection between these two kinds of sin. Venial sin leads to mortal. Rarely do we commit a grievous sin abruptly and precipitously. Ordinarily we are led to it by the unfortunate readiness with which we yield to venial sin. We form the habit of committing slight faults almost without remorse, gradually losing our dread of evil, dulling the delicacy of our conscience, enfeebling our will, strengthening our concupiscence. These habits of sin have the power of clouding our spiritual vision; so, by an almost imperceptible change, we bridge the gulf that separates venial from mortal sin.

III. Acts and Resolutions

A long time ago, my God, I renounced mortal sin. It has become an object of horror for me; the thought of thy hatred for sin and of the misfortune that might overcome me should I once yield to it covers me with confusion and I feel disposed to suffer anything rather than become guilty of a mortal sin. Do I feel the same toward venial sin? Does it fill me with any horror at all? Have I not in the depths of my heart a secret fondness for it? It is too true. Every day thy divine light discovers in me new attachments that lead me away from thee, desires which I have not the courage to resist, weaknesses that make me blush. You ask me to sacrifice them, and up to the present I have not resolved to act thus generously towards thee. So my heart, though not entirely attached to creatures, is not given entirely to thee.

Blessed Mary, obtain for me the grace to participate in the spotless purity that has been your glorious privilege. May I be generous and faithful enough, if not to avoid sin altogether—for that seems impossible to our human frailty—at least not to let my heart become attached to sin.

I resolve, therefore·

1. At my confessions to realize the need of sincerely detesting venial sin;

2. Whenever I commit any, to repent at once and to humble myself at my weakness;

3. To see that no inordinate attachment remains in me.

Grieve not the holy Spirit of God.[1]

Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.[2]

XIII

LUKEWARMNESS

SUMMARY

I. We will recall the severe reproach of our Lord to a tepid soul: *Because thou art lukewarm . . . I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth.* We will picture to ourselves those who tolerate two altars in their heart,—one to God, the other to creatures. We will thank our divine Master for his salutary warning.

II. We will consider that:

1. *Lukewarmness is an outrage against God.* It outrages the eminence of his being, which demands complete and generous obedience. It outrages his infinite perfection, which requires that we

[1] EPHES. 4[30]

[2] MATT. 5[48]

attach ourselves to him with love. It outrages the gifts that he bestows upon us; the fervent soul values them at their true worth and grows more perfect; the tepid soul abuses them.

2. *Lukewarmness scandalizes our brethren.* Everywhere it is contagious, but especially in community life, where it is more to be dreaded than bad example. It can permanently arrest the work of perfection in a soul.

3. *Lukewarmness exposes us to great dangers.* The tepid soul is apt to be satisfied with its unhealthy condition. It should consider that its lack of watchfulness and its laxity expose it to the danger of falling into mortal sin. This peril is found especially in bad thoughts, uncharitableness, neglect of work, and also in poor preparation for the sacrament of Penance.

III. We will humble ourselves at the thought that perhaps we have already entered on the road of lukewarmness. We will ask our Lord to help us quit this sad state and renew our fervor.

We will resolve:

1. Often to examine ourselves on this subject;
2. To be faithful to every exercise of piety;
3. To prepare with care for the reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist.

In carefulness not slothful, in spirit fervent, serving the Lord.

I. Adoration

Let us recall the severe reproach which, in the words of the Apocalypse, our Lord addresses

to a bishop who has fallen from his first fervor: *I would thou wert cold, or hot, but because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold, nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth.*[1] These words apply to those souls found even in the strictest religious communities, who neglect the care of their perfection and daily commit a great number of faults, although they do not wish to live at enmity with God and in complete forgetfulness of their eternal salvation. They are on the path that leads to heaven but instead of hastening thither like earnest pilgrims, they drag along slowly and painfully. They try to fulfill God's law and yet satisfy their own caprices. In these souls there are two altars: one to God, the other to creatures. On the former they occasionally perform some religious acts, offer up some prayers. On the latter they offer incense to as many idols as they have inclinations, tastes, and fancies, which they can satisfy without falling into mortal sin. Divine love is not absolutely extinguished in them. It gives forth a few sparks at times, but is counteracted, almost stifled, by inordinate, cherished attachments; by sensuality, vanity, lack of mortification; by petty grudges and animosities

[1] Apoc. , 15-16

wilfully entertained, a habit of uncharitable criticism, of complaining, of detraction; by a contempt for trifles, infidelity to rules, a spirit of insubordination and disobedience.

Let us adore our Lord who evinced such an attitude of profound disgust for this state of lukewarmness. While he does not reject the soul that is in this condition, he is on the point of doing so. *I will begin to vomit thee,* he says. Let us thank him for this salutary warning and ask him to fill us with a dread of so dangerous a state.

II. Considerations

The principal motives that we have for guarding against lukewarmness are these:

1. It is an outrage against God; 2. it is a scandal to our brethren; 3. it exposes us to serious dangers.

1. *It is an outrage against God.* In the first place, it outrages the eminence of his adorable being. The majesty of God is infinite. He is the greatest, the most august of all masters and accordingly we should devote ourselves to his service with all the intensity, zeal and fervor in our power. His eminence and our dependence on him require that we serve him fer-

vently. But what does the lukewarm soul actually do? It does not utter the cry of revolt, *I will not serve.* But instead of bringing to God's service that noble and generous will which is his due, it serves him only in a supine, indifferent way; not like a loving son to whom obedience is sweet and agreeable, but rather like a slave who obeys only through fear.

God is also the infinitely lovable Being to whom our heart should be attached as to its supreme good, whom it should love more than everything else, who alone deserves to be the end of all our activity and aspirations. The tepid soul does not understand this prerogative. Its love for God is an incomplete and divided love. As if God were not sufficient for it, it places him on a plane with creatures and, while giving itself to one, it does not wish to renounce the other. So the lukewarm soul outrages the eminence of God's being.

To help us perform the duties that we owe him, God does not cease to shower abundant graces upon us. This priceless gift that God the Father, in his love for us, has prepared from eternity, that the Word made flesh merited for us by his suffering and death, that the Holy Spirit generously bestows upon us through many different channels, fills the fer-

vent soul with gratitude. It sees the ransom which Jesus Christ paid for it by his blood. It is faithful to correspond to these divine graces and is thereby raised to greater perfection. But the tepid soul abuses and ignores this precious gift of God. By neglect, omissions, small faults without number, does it not habitually resist the inspirations of the Holy Ghost, does it not abuse the grace of God?

2. *Lukewarmness scandalizes our brethren.* It is an evil that spreads. This fatal consequence is very much to be feared, especially in communities, where it sometimes produces incalculable evil. A great deal has been said, and truly, about the deplorable consequences of bad example, that leads so many souls into sin. But in community life it is not bad example, strictly so called, that is mostly to be feared. It could not be manifested there without attracting the attention of superiors who would suppress it. Besides, the conduct of those giving seriously bad example would be in such contrast to the general spirit of the community that, instead of inducing imitation, it would excite only repulsion and disgust.

Far otherwise with lukewarmness. Just because it does not appear as something very

reprehensible, many indeed fail to guard against its pernicious influence, which is therefore the more to be feared. Who has not witnessed the sad spectacle of a seminarian or a priest, formerly quite fervent, relaxing little by little under the influence of lukewarmness? You can not reproach him with any considerable misdeed; perhaps, on account of his former conduct or certain personal qualities, he may even enjoy a very favorable reputation with his superiors and his fellows. But in spite of a certain commendable exterior he has neither piety nor regularity, no love of work, no humility, no charity. We can not begin to calculate the evil effects of such example for those who are his daily companions. The tepidity of his life spreads gradually to those about him. You might say that he is surrounded by an unhealthy atmosphere of negligence and laxity and that, almost without perceiving it, those who approach him are infected with the disease that he has already contracted. The sight of a fervent cleric makes others fervent, just as the sight of one who is tepid has a contrary influence. If such examples multiply in a community, the members will not reach the degree of perfection that God requires of them. Perhaps a certain

number will become unfaithful to their vocation; of those who persevere, many, if they do not later become bad priests, will be only very ordinary priests, without piety, devotedness, or zeal.

3. *Lukewarmness exposes us to very great dangers.* Too often the tepid soul remains calmly in its unhealthy condition under the pretext that, since it has firmly resolved to avoid mortal sin, it need not fear a fall that will send it to hell. This is a fatal illusion against which we should fortify ourselves.

Lukewarmness, it is true, is not by itself a state that deserves eternal damnation. But very often it happens that the tepid soul unwittingly reaches this state. It takes no account of the numerous little faults that it commits without scruple; it keeps itself on the boundary that separates mortal sin from venial. Now, how is it sure that it does not more than once pass over this limit, which is sometimes so hard to determine?

If we follow the lukewarm soul in the details of its life, we will discover reasons for serious alarm.

As it does not exercise watchfulness over its senses and its imagination, it is often filled with dangerous thoughts and images which a

simple consent can turn into grave sin. How can it be sure that it never gives this consent?

The tepid soul has no scruples against detractions; it criticises and censures freely; in many other ways it violates the virtue of charity, but calmly assures itself that it is never involved in matters of grievous importance. But here again may it not be deceived?

It approaches the sacrament of Penance regularly. But how does it prepare itself? What sorrow does it feel for the faults confessed, which it commits again so soon after confessing them? Is it not to be feared that these confessions, instead of purifying, only make it more guilty? What about waste of time, distractions in prayer, and so many other defects in nearly all its duties?

If we reflect, we shall see that what we sometimes take for tepidity is in reality a much more serious condition, the sleep that becomes death, the slope down which the soul has glided unconsciously into the abyss of grievous sin. If the lukewarm soul sometimes escapes this misfortune, at least it is always in imminent danger of falling.

By daily abuse of grace, it becomes unworthy of this divine gift and justly deserves that God should diminish the extent of his gener-

osity. On the other hand, the passions develop and grow strong owing to the lack of restraint and the concessions made to them, the rational will and the supernatural life grow weaker and weaker. Such a soul is at the mercy of its enemy.

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, am I not among the number of those lukewarm souls which thou art ready to reject with horror? If, thanks to thy grace, I have not yet reached that degree of tepidity which borders on mortal sin or is confounded with it, have I not at least entered upon the road that leads to it? How far I am from bringing to thy service that fervor, that energy, that generosity, with which the saints devoted themselves to thee! In spite of the many graces which thy generosity bestows upon me, I make almost no progress in perfection and scarcely feel a desire to advance. I am as if paralysed by a kind of numbness which I have no power to overcome.

Do not let me stay any longer in this state, my Savior, but make me understand my peril. Grant me the fervor of thy love and supply to my will that strength which it lacks. Destroy

those irregular attachments that divide my heart. Make it entirely thine.

I resolve therefore:

1. Often to examine myself to discover the first germs of lukewarmness;

2. In spite of the dislike that I may sometimes feel, always to be faithful to every exercise;

3. To prepare myself carefully for the worthy reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, the most efficacious preservative against tepidity.

In carefulness not slothful; in spirit fervent, serving the Lord.[1]

XIV

THE LAST THINGS

SUMMARY

I. We will adore the Holy Spirit inviting us to meditate frequently on the last things: *In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.* We will thank our Lord for teaching us the same truth when he speaks of the broad and the narrow path, of the rich man and Lazarus, of the foolish virgins, of the general judgment.

[1] Rom. 12[11]

II. To realize the importance of the thought of the last things, we will consider that:

1. *It enlightens us.* It makes us understand *the value of time,* when we consider it from the point of view of eternity; *the vanity of earthly possessions,* which appear unworthy of our pursuit; *the folly of sin,* by which we prefer a little satisfaction here to an eternity with God.

2. *It incites us to make greater effort.* Only the forgetting of these truths can explain the deplorable indifference of many to their eternal salvation. If we were actually about to pass into eternity, how we should hasten to correct our lives!

3. *It supports our weakness.* We need great courage to practice the Christian life. If we place ourselves face to face with death, judgment, the eternity of heaven or hell, we will have that courage, we will be ready to make any sacrifice.

III. We will regret having thought of the last things so seldom. We will ask the grace to become faithful in frequently recalling them. We will promise God to transport ourselves often in thought to one of these four stations: death, judgment, heaven, hell.

We will resolve:

1. To meditate often on the four last things;

2. To judge everything from the point of view of eternity;

3. When undertaking any important work, to ask ourselves: "What does this count for eternity?"

In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.

I. Adoration

Let us adore the Holy Spirit inviting us to remember and frequently to meditate on the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. In this thought, he tells us, we will find a powerful safeguard against sin. *In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.*[1]

Our Lord inculcates the same teaching many times in the Gospel, repeatedly placing before us the thought of the last things. At one time he gives us the picture of two roads, the broad highway that leads to perdition and the narrow path that leads to eternal life.

In another place he describes the folly of the rich man who, while surrounded with an abundance of earthly goods, destroyed his barns so as to build larger ones. He was delighted with the prospect of having henceforth nothing to do but enjoy the riches he had amassed. *But God said to him: Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee: and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?*[2] Was it not Jesus Christ himself who enun-

[1] Eccl. 7[40]
[2] Luke 12[20]

ciated this memorable maxim that has caused the conversion of so many saints: *What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul?*[1]

We have also the parable of the rich man cast into hell while the poor Lazarus rests in the bosom of Abraham and there enjoys the delights of heaven. The same lesson is taught in the story of the marriage feast from which the unworthy are excluded; of the foolish virgins punished for their negligence; of the husbandman, separating the good grain from the chaff, which he casts into the fire. We have also the description of the general judgment, in which, after the double sentence of election and reprobation, the good and the wicked will be forever separated.

So we hear the repeated warning to be ready for that uncertain hour when we shall receive the visit of the Master.

Let us thank our divine Lord for reminding us in so many ways that we must meditate on the last things and must keep the thought of them graven on our memory. So we will be ever vigilant and at our last hour we will not be found unprepared for the visit of the Judge who will pronounce this eternal sentence upon

[1] MARK 8^{36}

us: *Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching.*[1]

II. Considerations

To convince ourselves of the importance of remembering the last things, let us consider that in the practice of the Christian life this thought is: 1. a torch that enlightens us; 2. a spur that incites us; 3. a help that sustains us.

1. *The thought of the last things is a torch that enlightens us.* It recalls three fundamental truths that we should always keep before our eyes: the value of time, the vanity of earthly possessions, and the folly of sin.

The value of time. Considered in itself, in its short duration, in the swiftness of its flight, time is vain and unworthy of our esteem. What is the longest life? The Holy Ghost tells us that the life of man is like smoke that soon vanishes, a bit of light steam that rises up only to disappear immediately. *For what is your life?* says St. James. *It is a vapour which appeareth for a little while, and afterwards shall vanish away.*[2]

[1] Luke 12[37]
[2] James 4[15]

But from the point of view of our last end, time presents an entirely different aspect. If employed according to the will of God, it is worth an eternity of happiness. *For that which is at present momentary and light of our tribulation, worketh for us . . . an eternal weight of glory.*[1] So it is a precious possession that we ought to employ with great care, a treasure the waste or loss of which we ought keenly to regret.

The vanity of earthly possessions. What are they, these goods that an eager world pursues as if they were its supreme happiness—what are they to the man who meditates on the last things, who always values the things of earth from eternity's point of view? They should be desired not merely for the sake of possession but to promote the glory of God and the good of souls. And when we consider their value in connection with death, judgment, heaven, and hell, we understand what is meant by the vanity of earthly possessions, we appreciate the evil consequences of inordinate attachment to them. Now the goods of eternity are of such a nature that we are sure of possessing them if only we make ourselves worthy to receive them. Heaven's reward is enduring

[1] II Cor. 4[17]

and will render us forever happy; whereas wordly possessions are uncertain, they can not bring us happiness and, in any event, must be given up at death.

The folly of sin. What is sin in the light of our soul's eternal welfare? It is an evil that reason disapproves; furthermore, it is an act which affords us but temporary indulgence or satisfaction of some passion, some fleeting pleasure, and renders us liable to eternal separation from God, unending punishment in hell. Rather than forego some sinful enjoyment or satisfaction we take such frightful chances with our immortal soul. *Remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.*[1]

2. *The thought of the last things is a spur that incites us to greater effort.* Why are many Christians so deplorably indifferent to their eternal salvation? They exercise no watchfulness over themselves nor are they preoccupied about repairing the past or assuring themselves of the future, for they seldom think of the life to come. We should place ourselves in thought before those terrible events that will be the end of all our temporal interests; we should often say to ourselves: "This life through which I am hastening so recklessly will have an end; perhaps very soon

[1] Eccl. 7[40]

will come the last of my days; then, when death violently separates me from all temporal affairs, I shall stand at God's judgment seat to account for every moment of my earthly sojourn, for my good and evil deeds, for my use and abuse of God's graces." My sentence at that dreadful moment will be either heaven or hell, an eternity of bliss or of torment. Supposing ourselves on the eve of this great event, would we not be less concerned about things of earth than about our heavenly interests? Would we not be more watchful to preserve our conscience pure from every sin; would we not exercise that constant vigilance which Jesus Christ so often recommends in the Holy Gospel?

If indeed we were about to quit this world and appear before God, what regrets would we not feel at the remembrance of our infidelities and negligences; what salutary fear would we not experience at the thought of our approaching death and the eternity that must follow; how we would hasten to repair the faults of our life in the little time that would remain! But, as a matter of fact, it is from eternity's point of view that our life will be judged and we would do well to estimate the value of our acts from this same standpoint. Life is given us that we may prepare for an-

other world. Let us live, then, as if in very fact our eternity were about to begin.

3. *The thought of the last things is a help that supports our weakness.* The Christian life to which we are called by divine grace requires great courage to resist the temptations that assail us from all sides.

But from what source shall we derive this energy and courage? We will place ourselves in the presence of approaching death, of the judgment that awaits us, of the happy or wretched eternity that must follow. We will say to ourselves: "To merit heaven and avoid hell can I not surmount this temptation, overcome these desires, or perform this act of virtue?" What is the sacrifice that will last but a time when compared with the enduring suffering of hell or the eternal joy of heaven?

If the recollection of the last things does not produce in us the same heroic courage that it wrought in the saints of God, if it leaves us feeble and unable to make any generous or sustained effort, what is the cause? Is it not our failure to apply this thought to ourselves? It enters our souls without penetrating deeply, it makes but a passing impression upon us.

In imitation of the saints, let us meditate on the last things. In the midst of the occupa-

tions of life, let us never lose sight of eternity. Then we too will be strong against temptation. No inducement will cause us to break our resolutions, no temptation will overcome us, no obstacle stop us.

III. Acts and Resolutions

O my God, in the remembrance of the last things, thou hast given me a wonderful and efficacious means of avoiding sin and of strengthening myself in thy love. But is this thought of the inevitable approach of death a customary and familiar reflection with me? Is it not true that instead of imitating fervent souls in this matter I follow the world and look upon the end of my life with horror? I would avoid thinking of it as if I could thus escape the reality, and I continue to enjoy life with but little concern as to the hereafter. If I thought more often about these last things what a change it would make in me!

In the future, my God, I will follow more faithfully the example of the saints, the inspirations of thy grace, and the promptings of my reason itself. I will often go in thought to my death-bed where my present life is to end; to God's tribunal where I will be judged; to

heaven and to hell where for eternity I will be rewarded or punished. At each station of this pilgrimage I will ask myself what would be my sentiments, my judgments, my appreciations were I face to face with the reality. Thus will I strive to live now as I would wish to have lived when I reach the end, when for me time will be no more, when my eternity will begin.

I resolve therefore:

1. To meditate often on the four last things;

2. To judge everything from the point of view of eternity;

3. At the beginning of every important work to propose to myself this question, which one of the saints was wont to ask himself: "What does this count for eternity?"

In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.[1]

XV

THE CERTAINTIES OF DEATH

SUMMARY

I We will adore God as we see him pronouncing sentence of death against mankind: *Dust thou*

[1] Eccl. 7[40]

art, and into dust thou shalt return! What can we avail against death? We will acknowledge our dependence upon God's providence and will submit lovingly to this universal law of death.

II. We will consider the certainties of death.

1. *Death will end our life.* As every man's life had a beginning, so it must have an end. A moment will come when all our earthly power will vanish in death, when we too must pass away.

2. *Death will soon separate our soul and body.* At the moment of death our very being will be decomposed. The soul will no longer animate the body, which will then be only a cold and inert mass, a lifeless corpse, food for worms.

3. *Death will begin our eternity.* The soul will see at once a new world opening up before it. The moment of death marks the end of its probation and the beginning of its eternal reward or punishment.

4. *At the end of time our body will rise from the grave.* By a miracle of divine omnipotence the elements of our body will revive and, united again to the soul, will share its glorious or ignominious eternity.

III. We will reflect that our fixed and permanent abode is not here below. We will confess that we have thought too seldom of the inevitable end which every moment draws closer. No thought ought to be more familiar than this one of death. Death, standing at our very door, hardly costs us a thought. We will ask our Lord to dispel this illusion.

We will resolve:

1. To use every opportunity to recall the thought of death;
2. Often to picture the last moments of our life;
3. At least once a month to prepare ourselves for death.

It is appointed unto men once to die.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God as we see him pronouncing sentence of death against mankind, a sentence that we see carried out every day and that no one escapes: *Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return.*[1] As we contemplate the execution of this inexorable law, as we consider how generations of men appear on life's stage for an instant, presently to be ushered by death into eternity, let us offer our homages to God our Lord. *For it is thou, O Lord, that hast power of life and death,*[2] who, when creating us, determined the number of our days and fixed the bounds of our earthly pilgrimage.

Death, indeed, is the greatest manifestation of the presence and activity of God in the world, the highest and most authentic affir-

[1] Gen. 3[19]
[2] Wis. 16[13]

mation of his sovereign and all-powerful dominion which is exercised by an absolute right. It is imposed on all and to it all must yield.

What can we avail against death? Do we not feel that here is a force that surpasses all created power, a force in the presence of which all the resources of science, all the treasures of wealth, all earthly powers are equally useless?

Let us acknowledge this truth and confess our dependence on God's providence. Let us submit lovingly to this universal law that he has established and that will soon be executed against each one of us. *It is appointed unto men once to die.*[1]

II. Considerations

Our Christian faith and every-day experience discover in death certain incontestable truths that well deserve our attention.

1. *Death will end my life.* As every life on earth has had a beginning, so it must have an end. At some moment, determined from all eternity by the will of God, each life makes its appearance in the created world and takes its place in the company of creatures. Then, when its mission is accomplished, it disappears,

[1] Heb. 9[27]

vanishes. History is but a picture of succeeding existences that take the places of one another in perpetual change.

On all creatures this law is imposed. The plant that grows in the soil, the animal endowed with more perfect life, is not exempted from it.

Nor is man. His life, too, begins, passes through the different stages, and is ended. His pilgrimage here on earth has a fixed limit which he is powerless to overstep.

God has given many things over to the domain of man. He has permitted him to delve into the secrets of nature, to discover its hidden laws, to bring nature into further subjection that it may serve his needs the better. But a moment will come when all his earthly power will vanish in death. As Holy Writ says of the great Macedonian conqueror: *After these things, he fell down upon his bed, and knew that he should die.*[1] Thus it has been for all past generations; thus it must be for all to come. *One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.*[2]

A moment will come, therefore, when I too must pass away, when my life, like a flame deprived of fuel, will be extinguished, when

[1] I Macc. 1[6]
[2] Eccl. 1[4]

they will say of me what I have said of so many others: "He is dead."

2. *Death will separate my soul and body.* When, in the dispositions of Providence, I shall have reached the fatal moment, an astonishing revolution will take place within me. My very being will be decomposed. The soul, breaking its earthly bonds, will no longer animate the body. Life will be stopped and of this organism there will remain only a cold and inert mass. My eyes will be closed to the light, sounds will no longer be heard, my tongue will be silent, in short, the external world will be for me as if it did not exist. Death will take up its abode in the body which the soul has abandoned.

In a startling manner it will alter the features and the beauty of the body, making it an object of horror to the living, who will hasten to box it up and enclose it in a tomb far from all eyes. Death will pursue it even in this retreat and will give it up to corruption, to be the food of worms. It will not abandon this body until it has reduced it all to dust, until it has fully accomplished God's decree against sinful man: *Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return.*[1]

[1] GEN. 3[19]

3. *Death will begin my eternity.* While the body, deprived of life, decomposes and rots in the tomb, the soul sees at once a new world opening up before it. The moment at which it is separated from the body that it has animated marks the end of its probation. Until then it was subject to changes and had the power of passing at will from bad to good, from good to bad; it had the liberty of substituting new decisions for those which it made before. But this ceases at death. Once we have undergone this dreadful change, we enter upon a new state immutable and everlasting. As the soul is found at the moment when surprised by death, so it must remain during all eternity. If I am happy enough to die in the state of grace and in the friendship of God, my blessedness is assured forever. If, on the contrary, death surprises me in the bonds of mortal sin, I will be condemned to eternal reprobation.

4. *At the end of time my body will rise from the grave.* By a miracle of divine omnipotence, the elements of this body upon which death will exercise such power, which in the grave will be the food of worms, will not perish. One day these elements will be found again, they will unite to make a living human body to which my soul will be united, never

more to be separated from it. Such will be the resurrection after death, glorious for some, ignominious for others. *Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth, shall awake: some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach. to see it always.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

A few years more and the generation that now moves upon the earth will, in turn be subjected to this inexorable law of death. My body too will turn into dust and my soul will undergo the terrible judgment of God's justice. This earth is not my final resting place. Here below is not my fixed and permanent abode. Earth is a place of probation, like the shade in which the traveller rests for a moment before resuming his journey.

Why, then, should I fix my heart on what must pass so quickly, why think so little of the inevitable end which every moment draws closer? So many things recall this end. The very land that I tread under foot is a vast graveyard. And is not the thought of death repeatedly and insistently forced on my attention? The diseases that assail me and the

[1] Dan. 12[2]

innumerable accidents that threaten me show clearly that, like the rest of men, I too am condemned to die. No thought ought to be more familiar than this one of death. However, by a strange blindness I scarcely ever turn my attention to it. Innumerable interests, the acquisition of knowledge, business, the care of my health, all occupy my attention. But death, watching perhaps at my very door, ready to seize its prey, inevitable death, that will usher in the great day of eternity, hardly costs me a thought.

The life of most men is passed in this dangerous forgetfulness. To see them, to hear them, to follow them in their daily occupations, you would suppose they were convinced that the present life would have no end, that the earth would be their eternal abode.

O Lord dispel such a deplorable illusion. Since this life of mine must end, since, sooner or later, death will mark its close, turn my eyes away from present attractions and impress the thought of death deep down in my soul so that, when the moment comes for me to pass from this life, I may be neither surprised nor terrified.

I resolve therefore:

1. To use every opportunity to recall the thought of death;

2. Often to picture the last moments of my life;

3. At least once a month to prepare myself for death.

It is appointed unto men once to die.[1]

XVI

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF DEATH

SUMMARY

I. We will adore divine Providence who shrouds the law of death in obscurity and mystery. According to the Gospel, death is like a robber who surprises us at night, or like a master who returns unexpectedly. We will offer praise and thanksgiving to God for his infinite wisdom and mercy in reserving these important secrets for himself.

II. In death there are three principal mysteries:

1. *We do not know the time of our death.* This uncertainty is absolute, and will ever defy the calculations of human science. Long life is given to some men while many die in their youth. We can not promise ourselves a single hour.

2. *We do not know the circumstances of our death.*

[1] Heb. 9[27]

Death visits some after a long illness, but others are stricken without warning. For some death is easy, without suffering. Not so, however, for all. Many receive the consolations of the Church on their death-bed, but some are deprived of this happiness.

3. *We do not know in which state our soul will be after death.* We would like to die the death of the just. Yet on this very point we are in a wretched perplexity. Even had we the assurance of being now in the state of grace, we could not be sure that death would find us in the same state.

III. We will reflect on the necessity of constant vigilance. We will ask of God the grace to recall these thoughts of death often.

We will resolve:

1. Often to recall that perhaps our eternity will begin very soon;

2. Always to keep ourselves in such a state that we could fearlessly appear before the judgment seat of God.

Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour.

I. Adoration

Let us adore divine Providence who subjects man to the law of death but wills that in its execution this law be shrouded in obscurity and mystery. Except the inevitable

fact itself, of which we are sure, all the circumstances of death are uncertain. *All things*, says the Holy Ghost, *are kept uncertain for the time to come*.[1] Death is like a sudden flash of lightning without any warning; a robber who surprises an unprotected house where the occupants sleep in imagined security; a master who returns unexpectedly from a journey and finds his servants asleep. Such are the figures employed in the Holy Gospel to picture the suddenness with which death may come.

So our Lord urges us to be watchful; thus would he arouse us from the sleep into which we might fall, teaching us to be ever ready because we do not know at what hour to expect his last visit. *Watch ye therefore (for you know not when the lord of the house cometh)*.[2]

Let us adore God who, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, has been pleased to reserve these important secrets for himself. Whether he makes the divine light shine before us or obscures it in impenetrable darkness, he always has our sanctification and salvation in view, he is equally worthy of our love. Let us offer praise and thanksgiving to our Lord for his wisdom and mercy.

[1] Eccl. 9[2]
[2] Mark 13[35]

II. Considerations

In death there are three principal mysteries: I know that my life must end, but I do not know how soon; death will separate my soul from my body, but I do not know in what manner or under what circumstances this separation will take place; death will determine my eternal lot. but I can not be sure what lot will be mine.

Here is a threefold problem that human science can never solve and that leaves me in a state of anxious uncertainty.

1. *I do not know the time of my death. Watch ye therefore,* says our Lord, *because you know not the day nor the hour.*[1] Uncertainty is absolute on this point. I am sure that my life will not be protracted beyond a certain limit which, as I learn from observation, human life does not exceed; but I find it impossible to ascertain what will be the limit of my own life. This is God's secret.

Science has solved many riddles. It has enabled man to discover the laws of some phenomena so that he can infallibly predict their recurrence and frequency. But the law determining the duration of each life will always

[1] Matth. 25[3]

remain beyond man's knowledge. We feel inclined to say that death strikes haphazard, following no law but caprice.

Some there are whom death seems almost to forget to visit, despite the painful circumstances which beset them. In feeble health perhaps, in spite of every sort of privation, they reach even decrepit old age. Others are snatched away almost at the threshold of life. Between these two limits, what a mysterious and astonishing diversity there is in the duration of each life!

We may establish averages for society at large, but we know that for the individual all prophecy is deceptive, all calculations are vain and illusory. Neither strength nor health is a guarantee against the stroke of death, which falls without distinction or choice, at every age, in every condition, in every walk of life.

Now I may be full of youthful strength. Nothing seems to indicate that death is near at hand. On the contrary, I seem to have long years still to live. And yet, this very year, perhaps to-morrow, or even within an hour, I may find myself at the feet of the supreme Judge. When a new year begins, I can not say that I shall see its end. In the morning when I awake, I can not be sure that the

day just dawning will not be my last; and when I retire at night, I can not assure myself that I will live till morning. So death is a continual menace hanging over my head. It is sure to strike me some day, when at last the thread supporting the fatal blade breaks. How soon that will be, I know not.

If I kept this thought always before me, what a good influence would it not exercise over my actions; what a safeguard would it not prove against the illusions and attractions that lead me astray!

2. *I do not know the circumstances of my death.* Death visits some after a long illness which enables them to see its approach. They feel its sting; and the work of destruction by which it will end their life begins before their very eyes.

Others are stricken without warning and are instantly precipitated into eternity. Sudden and unexpected death is no rare phenomenon. Says the author of the *Imitation: Why thinkest thou to live long when here thou hast not a day secure? How many souls have been deceived and snatched unexpectedly from life! How often hast thou heard related, that such a one fell by the sword, another is drowned . . . this man died at table, that other came to his end at play! Some perish by fire . . .*

some by pestilence; . . . man's life passeth away suddenly like a shadow.[1]

For some death is easy, without suffering; their life is ended as if in peaceful slumber. For others it is accompanied by struggles and painful agony, as if the soul, besieged and pursued, refused to quit its earthly habitation and yielded only to violence.

Some preserve the use of their faculties to the very end, while others, die without showing any indications of consciousness.

Some die at home, surrounded by the care and sympathy of relatives and friends; others are surprised by death when far from home, abandoned by everyone, alone, and without assistance.

Many have the great happiness to receive the consolations of the Church on their deathbed. A priest is there to receive their last wishes, to absolve them and give them the viaticum of the dying, to accompany them with his blessing even to the tribunal of God. But sometimes an unfortunate combination of circumstances deprives others of this consolation. They die without the spiritual help of the sacraments.

Some few have a glorious death on the

[1] IMIT. I, 23[7]

battle field or in the performance of some heroic act of charity or in martyrdom for their Christian faith. But most of us shall meet death in obscurity, some perhaps dishonored and despised.

Of all these deaths, which one Providence has reserved for me is a secret known only to God, and of which I must remain in ignorance until the very end.

3. *I do not know in which state my soul will be after death.* It is a most important truth, but on this point the mystery of death is most impenetrable. It is a terrible problem, defying all calculation. My God, *let my soul die the death of the just.*[1] Grant me this supreme grace and avert from me the dreadful misfortune of dying in sin, of dying a reprobate.

But here I am in a wretched perplexity. Even had I the assurance—which I have not—of being in the state of grace at this moment, I might not conclude with certitude that I would be in the same state at the moment of my death. My present dispositions may change. How many persons, after serving God faithfully for several years, are in the state of sin when surprised by death! How

[1] NUM. 23[10]

many others, after a life of sin and crime, have the happiness of returning to God and dying penitent! Final perseverance is God's special gift, of which no one should despair but which no one can presume. No matter what has been our life, no matter what it is now, we can not count on final perseverance.

Let us acknowledge that in this mystery of death God's conduct is not only just but full of mercy and love.

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, thou hast willed to shroud the end of our life in mystery and obscurity. Like the good servant who stays awake to watch for his master's return so as to open the door for him without delay, I will be ever vigilant, I will hold myself ready to receive the visit of my God.

What a change would be produced in my life if I should often call to mind the uncertainty of death, if I should make it the frequent object of my thoughts, if I should often say to myself: "Perhaps in a few hours I shall stand before God's tribunal to render an account of my deeds, good and bad!" Then, doubtless, I would understand much better than I do now the necessity of being holy; I

would strive to do everything in a Christian and supernatural manner.

Accomplish this, my Savior, by thy grace. So many things speak to me of death and the frightful events that accompany it. Almost every day I hear sad accounts that tell of the suddenness of death, which should teach me to fear. With constant reminders on every side, it is easy for me to keep the thought of death before me. But to make this thought salutary, dear Lord, I need thy grace.

I resolve:

1. Often to recall that perhaps my eternity will begin very soon;

2. Always to keep myself in such a state that I could fearlessly appear before the judgment seat of God.

Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour.[1]

XVII

THE PROBABILITIES OF DEATH

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God and thank him for the knowledge that he bestows on us to help us work out

[1] MATTH. 25[13]

our salvation. We will find enlightenment even in the mystery of death.

II. Daily experience furnishes us with three probabilities on the subject of death.

1. *Probably our death is not far off.* We may possibly be among those who will live to old age. But what accidents and diseases constantly threaten us! Besides, very few men live to be old.

2. *Probably death will surprise us.* The Scriptures speak of death as an event that will happen unexpectedly. Experience teaches us that young and old, those in sickness and those who are well, all keep up the vain hope of a long life.

3. *Probably we shall die as we have lived.* Doubtless there are some sudden conversions just at death's door. But these exceptions are very rare. From the life we are actually leading, we can foresee our probable state at death.

III. We will thank our Lord for the light that he gives us. We will ask him to dispel our illusions on death and to make us live in the constant thought of it.

We will resolve:

1. To ask ourselves from time to time whether we are ready to appear before God's tribunal;

2. To strengthen ourselves against temptations by the thought of death.

Live as if about to die.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God and thank him for the light with which he surrounds us, and the knowledge that he bestows on us to help us work out our salvation and to make our lives more holy and Christian. Even the uncertainty and darkness in which he has willed to envelop the mysteries of death enlighten us on this last phase of our mortal existence and, by inspiring us with a salutary fear, forcibly urge us to constant watchfulness. The probabilities of death show how foolish we should be to rest in imagined security and peace when we have so many reasons to fear.

Ordinarily, in the absence of certitude, we act according to the greatest probability. On this principle are founded the rules of human prudence to which even the wordly wise conform. Let us follow these rules in the serious affair of our salvation.

Thus have the saints acted, those admirable models of Christian wisdom. To save their souls and to arm themselves against the mysterious eventualities of death, they always kept in mind the inevitable certainty of death and acted upon the strongest probabilities as to the time and manner of their death. We

should likewise make this the rule of our lives. Let us ask our Lord to enlighten us on the great mysteries of death. At the same time we must open our hearts to the influence of grace so that our meditation on this important truth may be the more salutary.

II. Considerations

From the knowledge that every day experience gives us on the subject of death, we can draw three conjectures that especially deserve attention.

1. *Probably my death is not far off.* Strictly speaking, it is possible that like a few others, I may reach extreme old age. But it is more probable that my life will soon come to an end. Should I not draw this conclusion from the countless dangers to which I am exposed? Without speaking of external perils, accidents of all sorts that may cause my death, destructive influences that surround me and against which I must constantly fight, there are within me more numerous and even more fearful dangers. Are not these the very causes that hurry so many out of the world every day? Who could enumerate the mortal diseases of frail humanity, which at any time may attack me and precipitate me into the grave? Indeed

they are so numerous and so common that we ask how a single man can be so fortunate as to escape. When we consider the delicacy of our organism and of its movements and when we realize that a slight derangement is enough to cause death, the preservation of human life seems like a miracle. The probabilities point to a short life rather than to a long one.

Then, too, precise, mathematical calculations lead us to the same conclusion. Mortuary tables have been made which indicate the probable duration of human life. From these tables, founded on careful statistics, we find that longevity is an exceptional phenomenon, that the majority of men die before reaching old age. We discover that out of ten thousand that come into the world every day, three thousand disappear before they reach the age of twenty and only half attain to fifty. All probabilities, therefore, indicate that my death is not far off.

2. *Probably death will surprise me.* At whatever time and in whatever manner death comes, it will strike us unexpectedly. This is what our Lord himself tells us. *I will come to thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know at what hour I will come to thee.*[1] . . . *If the*

[1] Apoc. 3[3]

householder did know at what hour the thief would come, he would surely watch, and would not suffer his house to be broken open.[1] *Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour.*[2] Everywhere in the Holy Scriptures death is represented as an event that will come unexpectedly.

Daily experience shows that it is generally so. Very few men think of death and watch for its coming. Nor is this blindness limited to the young; we are astonished to find it even among decrepit old folks. Many deceive themselves even at its approach and so are surprised by it.

On their very death-bed men often keep up the hope of a long life. Sometimes when an incurable disease has already made frightful ravages, although no one else has any doubt as to the issue, the sick man himself continues to hope. He will go so far as to discredit all hints of his approaching death. It is so hard to say: "I must die." Even when death has already begun its work of destruction, very often we believe it is still far off. Generally its last stroke falls when not expected.

This is what happens to most men, what

[1] LUKE 12^{39}
[1] MATTH. 25^{13}

will probably happen to me. I shall be surprised by death.

3. *Probably I shall die as I have lived.* Death is the echo and, as it were, the result of life. We sometimes hear it said: "I would not like to die in my present state and appear before God without first clearing away such or such a cloud in my past. When death approaches, I will reform my life; I will make up for past negligences by a general confession that will give peace to my conscience." But very probably, this is only a dream that will never be realized.

To be sure, there are occasionally sudden conversions just before death. It is possible for a criminal life to end in a Christian death, a lukewarm life in a fervent death. God is almighty and merciful. In a moment he can transform a sinner into a saint; as our Savior converted the good thief on the cross. But such cases are exceptions on which we can not count. As we live so we die. This is the general rule that will probably apply to me.

According to men long experienced in the conduct of souls, there are fewer death-bed conversions than is commonly supposed. What is generally taken for such is often only apparently so. The human soul follows

laws which grace does not ordinarily set aside. According to these laws we do not pass suddenly from a long accustomed disposition to a contrary one. Sinners who return to God are not converted all at once; they have to be prepared. The light of grace penetrates their soul little by little. Sometimes a long, fierce struggle follows. And it is only after sustained efforts that the will is freed at last from the bonds of sin and gives itself to God.

If it is so in the course of life while the soul is able to make a generous determination, how much more true in the midst of the physical and moral feebleness that precedes death!

If we wish to determine, with a probability approaching certainty, in what state our soul will be at the moment of death, we have only to consider the habitual dispositions in which we are passing our life. Whatever we have been, we will be then. We die as we have lived; in sin or lukewarmness if we have lived in sin or lukewarmness; in the love of God, if happily we have passed our life in that state.

III. Acts and Resolutions

The mystery of death, however impenetrable, is not entirely obscured. In the midst of this darkness, I perceive distinct lights, placed

there to mark out my path. These are the lights that I want to follow. My good Savior, do not permit me to lose sight of them or to stray from the path which they indicate. Let me not be in the number of those foolish ones who live as if they were never to die or as if they had need to fear death only in the far distant future. They also seem to imagine that by forgetting death they will be forgotten by it. This is a deplorable illusion, by which many expose themselves to the greatest of all misfortunes eternal separation from thee.

The probabilities of death make me believe that it is near, that it will surprise me, and that it will find me in the same state as that in which I am now living. Enlightened and fortified by thy grace, my Jesus, I wish to live with my attention fixed on this great event that will decide my eternity. Should my death be sudden, may it not find me unprepared; *like to men who wait for their lord, when he shall return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open to him immediately.*[1] I wish so to rule my life and to keep my conscience in such a state that, at whatever time and in whatever manner

[1] LUKE 12[36]

death comes, it may not be an object of fear. My God, I desire to die in thy grace and thy love.

I resolve therefore:

1. To ask myself from time to time whether I am ready to appear before God's tribunal;

2. To strengthen myself against temptations by the thought of death.

Live as if about to die.

XVIII

THE ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH

SUMMARY

I. We will adore Jesus Christ submitting to the general law of death. Throughout his earthly life he ever submitted his will to that of his heavenly Father and generously accepted his approaching death. This was especially evident in the Garden of Olives the night before he died. *Not my will,* he said, *but thine be done.*

II. We will consider the following reasons for accepting death generously:

1. *Death is a law, a decree of God's providence* to which we must all conform. It is the will of God that condemns us to die. Accordingly, generous submission to this law is an act of love for God.

2. *Death is an expiatory sacrifice.* Sin is the

unjust preference of the creature to the Creator. Death is the greatest expiation we can offer for our sins.

3. *Death is a deliverance.* It is *a relief from sorrow.* From how much grief and suffering will it not deliver us? It is *our release from sin.* For the Christian, whether he realizes it or not, sin is the greatest evil; and only death will free us from its snares. It is *our recall from exile.* Heaven is our home which we can enter only through death.

III. We will determine to meet death generously and valiantly since God has decreed it, since it is the greatest sacrifice of expiation we can offer and since it is a condition of admission to our heavenly home.

We will resolve to accept our death in humble submission to God's holy will.

To die is gain.

I. Adoration

Let us adore the Son of God humbly submitting to the general law of death. Holy and innocent, he was entirely free from sin, and he need not have subjected himself to the common lot. When his heavenly Father offered him the cross on which he was to undergo a cruel death, despite his natural aversion to such a death, he accepted it in humble submission, he embraced it with un-

bounded love. *Who having joy set before him, endured the cross.*[1]

From the beginning of his life he offered himself, a victim to appease the divine justice. Many times during the course of his mortal life did he testify his desire to accomplish this great sacrifice. And finally in the Garden of Olives, on the night before his immolation, again he accepted the bitter chalice that his heavenly Father presented to him. *Not my will,* he said, *but thine be done.*[2]

By his own striking example, our divine Master teaches us with what humble submission we ought to accept the decree of death to which we are all condemned. If we can not say with St. Paul that we have a *desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ,*[3] we should at least accept God's decree in humble submission.

II. Considerations

Death should be willingly accepted since it is decreed by God, is an expiatory sacrifice, and a deliverance.

[1] Hebr. 12[2]
[2] Luke 22[42]
[3] Philip. 1[23]

1. *Death is a law established by God.* It is enforced against all of us. Though we must eventually yield to death, we should not look upon it as the result of chance or blind fate. It is a decree of God's providence, of his wisdom and goodness, of his supreme will which rules the universe. God has also determined the time, the place, and the manner of our death, thus asserting his sovereign dominion over life, which is really his and which he disposes of as absolute master.

Now, the obedience which we owe to God consists not only in the fulfillment of his commands, but in a more excellent way, in unhesitating conformity to the order and disposition of his providence, in willing what he wills. God is our Master, our sovereign Lord; his laws are the determinations of a perfect will to which ours ought in all things to conform. Accordingly, when we become resigned to death we are but conforming to a divine decree; we are most perfectly fulfilling the great command of the love of God. For, if we truly love God, we will readily accept his decrees, whether such obedience entails comfort or hardship, life or death.

I thank thee, my God, for having given me life. Thou hast willed that after a few years this life shall end. For this I thank thee

also. *For so hath it seemed good in thy sight.*[1]

2. *Death is an expiatory sacrifice.* Sin is the unjust preference of the creature to the Creator. It was through sin that death came into the world and with death came the countless trials and difficulties by the patient endurance of which we are chastened and rendered acceptable to God. Death is the greatest expiation we can offer since it takes from us our riches and pleasures and even the most precious of our earthly possessions, life itself.

Death is, therefore, par excellence, the expiatory sacrifice which God requires of us sinners. When we consider it from this point of view and gladly submit to it, we are performing a holy and most meritorious act. If we accept death with these dispositions, it is divested of much of its hideous repulsiveness, and assumes a noble character. We see not only the weakness and the nothingness of the creature but also the self-sacrifice of a victim. The death-bed becomes an altar; the expiring body a host; the disease, a consuming fire; the soul freely offering itself in expiation for sin, the priest.

3. *Death is a deliverance,* which we should

[1] MATT. 11[26]

accept hopefully and lovingly. We are terrified by death because we see in it only a loss and separation; but let us consider the benefits and advantages which it brings and it will appear to us in a very different light. It is a relief from sorrow, a release from sin, and the end of our exile.

Death is *a relief from sorrow.* Who has not at times been oppressed at the sight of so much grief and suffering in the world? Whose life has not been marked by trials and crosses, bodily pains and pains of the soul, adversity and reverses, the failings of those with whom we live, and our own shortcomings? All these are crosses that we must bear. Who has not experienced some great trial or reverse in life, some heartrending sorrow, some anguish of soul which the things of earth could not assuage? *Unhappy man that I am,* said St. Paul, *who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*[1] Death alone will bring all these sorrows to an end.

It is *a release from sin.* The great evil of our present life is sin, for it offends God whom we should love above all things. The desire to avoid sin inspired the saints with their intense zeal for eternal life, made them long for

[1] ROM. 7[24]

death. "I am at the end of my course," said one of God's elect just before his soul returned to its Creator, "I will sin no more." When we too understand what a great misfortune it is to offend God, then death will appear desirable to us.

Death is *the end of our exile.* Our home is not here on earth. As the great Apostle once said: *We have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come.*[1] Heaven is our home where we shall spend eternity with Christ. *We know,* says the inspired word, *that if our earthly house of this habitation be dissolved, that we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in heaven.*[2] So death should be joyfully accepted by us as the end of sorrow, of sin, and of exile. *Woe is me, that my sojourning is prolonged! . . . My soul hath been long a sojourner.*[3]

III. Acts and Resolutions

The fear of death is good and salutary. It is a powerful incentive to preserve me from sin and to strengthen my fervor and zeal. But I

[1] Heb. 13[14]
[2] II Cor. 5[1]
[3] Ps. 119[5]

should adopt a nobler, more meritorious, more Christian attitude towards death. Since thou, my God, hast decreed it, I should accept it generously and lovingly.

Thou dost condemn me to die and in so doing dost exhibit thy power, thy justice, and thy love. Life is a trust which thou hast confided to me but over which thou art still master. Should I not be ready to yield it up when thou dost require it of me? Ought I not gladly sacrifice it on the altar of expiation? Should I not heartily desire the removal of this obstacle which bars the entrance to my eternal home where I will be forever united to thee in love?

I am ready to die at whatever time and place thy providence has determined, in whatever manner thou hast chosen for me, whether it shall be expected or unexpected, now or after a longer pilgrimage. I accept death without complaint or murmur. Life, the most precious gift in my possession, I offer to thee, happy thus to acknowledge thy absolute power and my absolute dependence.

I resolve therefore to accept my death in humble submission to God's holy will.

To die is gain.[1]

[1] PHILIP. 1[21]

XIX

THE PARTICULAR JUDGMENT

SUMMARY

I. We will adore Jesus Christ, as our Judge. It is to him we must one day render an account of our whole life. On his sentence will depend our eternal misery or happiness.

II. The God who will judge us is infinitely wise, infinitely just, infinitely powerful.

1. *God is an infinitely wise Judge* whom nothing can escape. Earthly judges often err. Not so, however, with our final Judge; not only our most secret actions but even our motives and aspirations are clearly known to him. The sins we have committed, the graces abused will on that last day of our earthly pilgrimage be clearly manifested to us.

2. *God is an infinitely just Judge* who can not be influenced. Many are the ways of defeating justice at the hands of men; not so however with God. During our mortal life God is unbounded in his mercy. After this era of mercy must come the reign of justice.

3. *God is an infinitely powerful Judge* whom nothing will escape. Flight or resistance will be impossible, and his sentence is final.

III. That we may undergo God's judgment with confidence and joy, we will decide to judge ourselves severely in this life.

We will resolve:

1. To ascertain the state of our souls by a serious examination of conscience every day and every month;

2. To expiate our sins by penance.

My Jesus, be not a Judge but a Savior to me.

I. Adoration

It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.[1] Let us imagine a soul at the moment it leaves the body which it has animated. While the latter lies stiff and lifeless, while those standing about note the ravages already begun by death, the soul suddenly finds itself in the presence of its Creator, there to hear the sentence that will decide its eternity: *For we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ,* says St. Paul, *that every one may receive the proper things of the body, according as he hath done, whether it be good or evil.*[2] Who can describe the feeling that overcomes the soul upon its entrance into this new world where it must render to that Judge who will appear in all his power

[1] Hebr. 9[27]

[2] II Cor. 5[10]

and majesty a strict account of its mortal life? Since our Master may, at any time, call us before his awful tribunal, let us often go there in spirit and ask ourselves how we would face that examination.

Quid sum miser tunc dicturus,
Quem patronum rogaturus,
Cum vix justus sit securus.[1]

I adore thee, Jesus, as my Judge. It is to thee I must one day render an account of my whole life. On thy sentence will depend my eternal misery or happiness. Submitting to thy justice, I implore thy mercy. Although my judge, be also my Savior.

II. Considerations

The God who will judge me is infinitely wise, infinitely just, infinitely powerful.

1. *God is an infinitely wise Judge*, to whom nothing is unknown. Among men the judgments passed upon one another, whether private or public, are often marred by error. How often do we not see most experienced judges, after hearing a case with great care and

[1] Sequence of the Mass for the dead.

attention, hesitate before passing judgment lest the guilty be acquitted or the innocent condemned? Not only does our neighbor's conscience escape our investigations; but even our own is sometimes obscured.

At the tribunal of the sovereign Judge, however, everything will be revealed. *The Lord beholdeth the heart,*[1] says Holy Writ: *The searcher of hearts . . . is God.*[2] *All things are naked and open to his eyes.*[3] From my first hour his eye has been upon me. He has seen all the good and bad acts of my life, whether performed in secret or before men. All my intentions he has valued to a nicety, the extent of reflection and consent I have given, all the circumstances that have affected their moral value.

When I appear before God's judgment seat, he will make me see in clear detail my entire life from the time that reason began to influence my acts. All my sins, both slight and grievous, sins of childhood, of manhood, and of my old age, will be arrayed before me like a hostile army. And I shall distinctly perceive all their circumstances and number.

[1] I KINGS 16[7]
[2] PS. 7[10]
[3] HEBR. 4[13]

At the same time, the sovereign Judge, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, will show me the multitude of graces that he has showered upon me and that I have abused: so many instructions, such frequent reception of the sacraments, so many exercises of piety, so many encouragements and good examples. He will make plain the degree of perfection to which these graces should have led me.

There will be manifested likewise all the penances I have performed, all my good works and virtuous acts, struggles against temptation and victories over my passions and inclinations.

God grant that in the comparison the good will be found to outweigh the evil of my life.

2. *God is an infinitely just Judge* who can not be influenced. Many are the ways of defeating human justice and of escaping punishment. But God always judges according to strict equity. *This Judge*, says St. Augustine, *is inaccessible to favor, money can not corrupt him, nor pity move him; no satisfaction can appease him.*[1]

During our mortal life God is merciful. His patience with sinners is without measure.

[1] *De symb.*, III, 8

When we commit monstrous outrages against him, when we insult and blaspheme him, he resents it not. In silence he bears the sins of men, only waiting for the guilty ones to be sorry and do penance. And when they return to him, how gladly he receives them! No matter how numerous and grievous their sins may be, he gives them his grace and never withholds his friendship.

But after this era of mercy will come the reign of justice. In the most rigorous equity God will pronounce irrevocable sentence. Tears and supplication will no longer be efficacious. Every sin not already expiated by penance on earth will receive a punishment proportionate to its gravity. *Thou shalt not go out from thence till thou repay the last farthing.*[1]

How many faults have I not committed and how little penance have I performed to expiate them?

3. *God is an infinitely powerful Judge* whom nothing will escape. Men sometimes succeed in evading the punishment ordered by human judges. Though condemned, a man may appeal to higher authority; by influence he may

[1] MATTH. 5[26]

avoid the severity of strict justice; he may even find safety in flight.

But who can have recourse to such expedients against the decrees of God Almighty, from whom there is no appeal, no escape? To what tribunal is there appeal from the sentence uttered by God himself? Flight from God is impossible, for whither could we flee? Resistance is folly. What can a sinful soul do to escape the sentence of the inexorable Judge? Nothing at all. It can hope for no succor. Then will begin that eternity of suffering so often referred to in Holy Writ. *There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*[1] *The desire of the wicked shall perish.*[2]

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, what would be my lot if I had to appear before thy judgment seat at this moment to render an account of my life and hear the sentence of your judgment? If death should surprise me, would I not have good reason to tremble?

[1] Matth. 8^{12}.
[2] Ps. 111^{10}

What shall I do in preparation for thy eternal justice? Thy great apostle has said: *If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.*[1] That I may undergo thy judgment with confidence and joy, I will judge myself severely in this life. By serious and searching examination of conscience I will dispel the illusions that hinder me from discerning the true state of my soul. Of what avail will it be to me to cloak my faults from my own eyes, to deceive myself, to sleep in imagined security? Must I not confess the full truth on that day of my judgment? Grant then, my Jesus, that I become now my own inexorable judge so that on my last day I may find thee not a Judge but a Savior.

I resolve therefore:

1. To ascertain the state of my soul by a serious examination of conscience every day and every month;

2. To expiate my sins by penance.

My Jesus, be not a Judge but a Savior to me.

[1] Cor. 11[31]

XX

THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

SUMMARY

I. We will picture to ourselves the events that will take place at the end of the world. For the first time the entire human race will be assembled and will acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and God. We will adore him who will judge the world at the end of time.

II. We will consider that:

1. *The general judgment will be the justification of God's providence.* Almighty God created the world and has governed it by his all-wise and generous providence. On the last day his government of the world will appear to us as a marvelous work of wisdom, justice, and goodness.

2. *The general judgment will be the triumph of the just.* In the present life the just are modest, obscure, often despised, and sometimes enduring great suffering; they are persecuted, misunderstood, unsuccessful. But the excellence of their virtue will be manifested on the last day. They alone will appear truly great.

3. *The general judgment will be the ignominy of the wicked.* Then will be removed the delusions of this world. Sinners will clearly perceive the malice and enormity of their iniquity. And their consciences will be exposed to the whole world.

III. We will acknowledge that on the last day we shall be witnesses of God's judgment and also its object. Our entire life will be made manifest. Will it be to our confusion or to our glory? We will ask of God the grace to make the thought of judgment day inspire us with greater fervor and strengthen us against sin.

We will resolve:

1. To think often of the judgment of God;

2. Every night to ask ourselves whether we are prepared to undergo that judgment.

It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.

I. Adoration

Let us picture to ourselves the events that will take place at the end of the world. *He shall send his angels with a trumpet, and a great voice: and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the farthest parts of the heavens to the utmost bounds of them.*[1] Generations of men asleep in their tombs will rise again, and for the first time the entire human race will be assembled to await the judgment of its God.

In the presence of that immense and aston-

[1] Matt. 24[31]

ished multitude, Jesus Christ, the sovereign judge of the living and the dead, *shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels.*[1] Then will the just and the sinners alike acknowledge him as their Lord and Master. Thus will begin the glorious reign of the incarnate Word over risen humanity.

Let us prostrate ourselves in spirit before this King of glory. Let us rejoice in advance at the honors he will receive, at his final triumph over sin, when he will come in glory to judge the world and to establish his eternal empire over the souls of men!

II. Considerations

To understand and appreciate our interest in the general judgment, let us consider that it will be: 1. the justification of God's providence; 2. the triumph of the good; 3. the shame of the wicked.

1. *It will be the justification of God's providence.* Not only did almighty God create this world and all it contains out of nothing, not only does he sustain the life of his creatures,

[1] Matt. 16[27]

but his all-wise and generous providence directs all the events in the world towards the ends determined by his infinite wisdom. Yet this divine interference in the affairs of earth is most mysterious and hidden. Rarely is it revealed in a striking manner. Man, in the exercise of his free will and in his ever increasing control over the rest of creation, seems to be supreme lord of the universe, regardless of any power divine. Moreover, if we contemplate the sad spectacle of sin and depravity, of fraud and injustice, of suffering and arrogance, on every side, we are almost persuaded that God is indifferent to the welfare of his creatures or that he has forgotten them.

But on the great day of the universal manifestation the veil will be drawn aside and the wisdom and goodness of divine Providence in his dominion over the world will be revealed. Then will God's justification be manifest. The government of the world will appear to us as a marvelous work of wisdom, justice, and goodness.

A work of wisdom. On that day we shall perceive that the world, whether considered as a whole or in the minutest details, has been the realization of a plan in which every being

and every event has a reason for its existence and a proper place in the perfect harmony of the universe. We shall see that the well ordered world of nature has served as a basis for the supernatural world which, in turn, receives its crown in the eternal world of glory. Then will we perforce believe the words of the Psalmist: *How great are thy works, O Lord! thou hast made all things in wisdom.*[1]

A work of justice. God is infinitely just. He must therefore not require of his creatures anything above the strength of their powers and he must exactly proportion punishment or reward to the merits of each individual. This double exercise of divine justice, though now hidden from us, will be manifested with striking clearness on the last day.

We shall have to admit that of all the laws imposed upon us by God none was beyond our power to obey. Then shall we see how abundantly God offered his grace to help us observe his laws.

God's justice will appear no less clearly in the assignment of rewards and punishments. *Then will he render to every man according to his works.*[2] When we look about us, this law

[1] Ps. 103[24]
[2] Matth. 16[27]

appears to be frequently violated. It would seem at times that God actually shows a preference for those who disregard his commands, that he favors them with the goods and pleasures of this world. Happiness is not consequent on virtue, nor sorrow on vice. But a day will come when, in the light of fuller knowledge, we shall see the action of divine Providence completely justified. Then shall we be forced to acknowledge: *Thou art just, O Lord: and thy judgment is right.*[1] *Just and true are thy ways, O King of ages.*[2]

A work of mercy and goodness. The wonderful revelations of that last day will show us the infinite love of almighty God for his creatures, his concern for man's happiness. Our whole life will truly appear as an unbroken succession of God's merciful and generous benefactions. Every one will have to own that in order both of nature and of grace he has been the recipient of much greater and more numerous favors than he could justly claim.

Thus will the providence of God, so long unknown or misunderstood, be justified at last and glorified before the entire universe.

[1] Ps. 118[137]
[2] Apoc. 15[3]

2. *The general judgment will be the triumph of the just.* In the present life there are two classes of men in the world: one class tumultuous, clamorous, ambitious; the other modest, quiet, obscure, seeking neither to be seen nor to shine. By these characteristic marks we recognize the class of the wicked and of the just.

God has done and ordained everything in view of the latter, still they seem to be insignificant in the world, persecuted, misunderstood, hardly tolerated. They are the ones who practice virtue; they are chaste, temperate, honest, charitable—sometimes heroically charitable—faithful to all their duties as Christians, yet their merit is not recognized by the world. The working of grace in their souls is generally hidden.

What do we know of their lives? A few occasional flashes of virtue that give us but an imperfect idea of the holiness of their heart; some external works of piety which, like dim reflections, only incompletely manifest the internal beauty of their soul; a few words that feebly express the charity ever burning within them.

But a day will come when God will lay bare the consciences of all, when the sanctity of

the just, obscured on earth, will be manifested in its glory before the astonished world. Then will appear all the supernatural works which they accomplished by the help of God's grace, from the most heroic self-sacrifice to the humblest act of abnegation, from the grandest acts of love and mercy to the simplest and most obscure deeds of charity; in short, all the virtues they practiced; purity which no allurement could seduce, humility that never displayed itself, complete sacrifice of earthly attachments, unquestioning obedience, firm patience, habitual charity, continual prayer which was an imitation on earth of the life in heaven, perfect purity of intention which sought no interests but God's.

Thus will God reward his saints for the scorn of the world. They alone will appear truly great, truly beautiful, truly rich, truly wise. Well may the sinners cry out: *These are they, whom we had some time in derision and for a parable of reproach. We fools esteemed their life madness, and their end without honour. Behold how they are numbered among the children of God, and their lot is among the saints.*[1]

[1] Wis. 5[3-5]

3. *The general judgment will be the ignominy of the wicked.* It is impossible to express how great will be their horror when all their sins unatoned for, all their shameful thoughts, guilty desires, unkind and thoughtless words, sinful acts, when these, in all their blackness and malice, will become openly manifest.

Then the sinners seeing it *shall be troubled with terrible fear.*[1] Then will be removed the delusions that make us judge as good acts which are really sinful: the pretext of passion, the culpable ignorance which hides the baseness of our sins even from our own eyes, the lightness of mind that makes us quickly forget our transgressions, the giddiness which keeps us from carefully examining our conscience. But before God's judgment seat on the last day all obstacles will disappear, all clouds of obscurity will be scattered. When forced to gaze on all the sins of their mortal life, sinners will clearly perceive the malice and enormity of their iniquity. In their own eyes will they become an abomination, an object of horror.

If they were the only witnesses of these disclosures! Before the whole world the consciences of the wicked will be laid bare as well

[1] Wis. 5[2]

as those of the just. Those hypocrites who were concerned only about appearances, who displayed so much cunning in concealing their sinfulness, will then be seen as they really are in the sight of God. No longer will deceit and pretence be possible. Everything, even their most secret thoughts, will be known on the great day of judgment.

III. Acts and Resolutions

On the last day, O my God, I will be a witness of thy judgment and also its object. My entire life, to its most minute details, will be made manifest. *For nothing is covered that shall not be revealed; nor hid, that shall not be known.*[1] Lord, will it be to my confusion or to my glory? This question I should often ask myself to prompt me to keep my soul in justice and holiness, prevent me from doing aught that might cause me shame on the day of judgment, and urge me to atone for the past sins of my life by sincere repentance.

Merciful Lord, make me fear thy judgment. The thought of it was sufficient to inspire

[1] Matth. 10[26]

many of thy saints with a holy courage that overcame temptations and prompted most heroic sacrifices. Grant that I may imitate them and that the thought of thy judgment may strengthen me against sin and inspire me with greater fervor in thy divine service.

I resolve:

1. To think often of the judgment of God;

2. Every night to ask myself whether I am prepared to undergo that judgment.

It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.[1]

XXI

HELL

SUMMARY

I. We will make an act of faith in this terrible but indubitable truth, that there is a hell, acknowledging the fairness of God's judgments even when most severe. We will ask of our Lord the grace to make our meditation produce in us a salutary fear of hell.

II. To arouse a salutary and efficacious fear of hell we will consider: 1. its existence; 2. its punishments; 3. the danger of being sentenced to hell.

[1] HEB. 9[27]

1. *There really is a hell.* This is a truth unmistakably revealed by God and defined by his Church. Reason finds in this doctrine a terrible mystery; but would not the present world without a hell beyond the grave be still more mysterious and inexplicable?

2. *The punishments of hell are severe and eternal.* Holy Writ describes them as enveloping darkness, avenging fire, and a gnawing worm, viz. separation from God, intense suffering, perpetual remorse of conscience.

Moreover, the lost souls are damned forever; hell is eternal.

3. *We are in danger of being sentenced to hell.* A single mortal sin unforgiven is punished by the never ending eternity of hell. But it is possible for me to fall into mortal sin and to die without becoming reconciled to God.

III. We will ask of God the grace to have a salutary fear of divine justice. If the holy souls of saintly men have not neglected this means of strengthening themselves against temptation, how much more readily should we accept its support.

We will resolve:

1. To renew our faith in the dogma of hell;

2. By frequently thinking of its eternal suffering to endeavor to persevere in the state of grace.

From perpetual death, deliver us, O Lord.

I. Adoration

Let us make an act of faith in this terrible but indubitable truth, that there is a hell. Just as there is a paradise where God will reward his faithful friends with unending blessedness, so there is a place of torment where the wicked will pay the eternal penalty of their offenses. Whatever difficulty I may have in understanding this awful and mysterious doctrine, O my God, I adhere to it as a truth beyond doubt. I adore thy perfect justice without endeavoring to analyze it, and I acknowledge the fairness of thy judgments even when most severe. Thou art as just in thy punishments as in thy rewards, and thy divine perfections are manifested when thou dost punish the reprobate as well as when thou dost admit the saints to the delights of heaven. Thou art ever deserving of my adoration, praise, and love.

The flames of hell were enkindled to punish the violation of thy law. Already many wretches have begun to expiate the sins of their mortal life by torments that find only a pale reflection in the sufferings on this side of the grave.

Dear Lord, by thy grace, make this meditation produce in me a greater hatred of sin which thou dost punish with such severity. May I have the courage to undergo the greatest sacrifices, if need be, in order to avoid the punishment of hell. By meditating on hell, may I escape the reality of its eternal punishments.

II. Considerations

If we are to have a salutary and efficacious fear of hell, we must be fully aware: 1. that it really exists; 2. that its punishments are severe and eternal; 3. that we are in danger of being sentenced to spend eternity there.

1. *There really is a hell,* a place of suffering where the unpardoned sins of men receive eternal punishment. This is a matter of faith to which revelation gives abundant testimony. Holy Writ asserts this dogma most unmistakably. We find it repeatedly in the words of the divine Master himself who positively taught that hell exists, characterized the sufferings there undergone, and declared it to be eternal. Heaven for the good, hell for the wicked. According to the teaching of Jesus

Christ, such will be the conclusion of the world's history, the double sanction of God's holy law. *These shall go into everlasting punishment; but the just, into life everlasting.*[1]

Tradition is no less precise on this point, for the fathers of the Church teach the reality of hell. The sermons of the most learned and holy preachers, the instructions of pastors, and the works of spiritual writers all presuppose the existence of hell.

Holy Mother the Church, to impress upon these testimonies the seal of her infallible authority, has defined the doctrine of an eternal hell as a matter of faith. So there can remain no doubt whatever as to its reality. Moreover, the belief in hell is found not only in the Church of God but in all ages and among divers peoples; neither prejudice nor ignorance nor passion has been able to drive from men's hearts the expectation of reward and punishment in another life, a truth taught alike by civilized nations and barbarous tribes.

Reason, likewise, confirms this teaching of faith. To be sure, reason finds in the doctrine of hell a terrible mystery. But would not the present world without a hell beyond the grave be still more mysterious and inexplicable?

[1] MATTH. 25[46]

I ought to believe without hesitation or doubt, my God, this great manifestation of thy justice, and I should make an act of faith in the reality of hell. Drive from my mind every hesitation or doubt that may arise, and do not allow any sophistic reasoning to obscure my belief in the reality of hell.

2. *The punishments of hell are severe and eternal.* The Holy Scriptures describe the sufferings of the damned as enveloping darkness, avenging fire, and a gnawing worm.

Darkness. The blessed in heaven are flooded with the light of God's presence as they contemplate his divine essence in the beatific vision. But this happiness is not the lot of the wicked. The sentence of God against them will be: *Depart from me, you cursed.*[1] This suffering of theirs is what theology calls the pain of loss, and, in a way, constitutes the essential punishment of hell. It is infinitely more dreadful than the other sufferings of the damned; indeed its severity is greater than we can appreciate here on earth because we are strongly attracted by the pleasures derived from the created world about us and because our knowledge of the supreme Good

[1] MATTH. 25[41]

is indirect and incomplete. But for the damned the illusions of the present life will have vanished and God will then appear to them as their last end and they will see that the possession of this supreme Good should have constituted their eternal blessedness. Moreover, despair and hatred of the Almighty will follow the realization that they have irretrievably lost the blessedness of possessing God.

Fire. By this word Holy Writ expresses the intensity of the suffering in hell. In the physical world no pain is more keen and penetrating than that of fire. To express extreme suffering, human language has no more forcible image. At the simple thought of a poor wretch slowly burned alive at a stake, we feel a shudder of horror. Yet St. John in the Apocalypse refers to hell as "a pool burning with fire and brimstone," prepared by an avenging God.

The worm. Holy Writ calls hell a place *where their worm dieth not.*[1] This expression is used to designate their perpetual remorse of conscience. They will confess that they well deserve the punishment inflicted upon

[1] MARK 9[43]

them, for their sins will rise up before them like a hideous phantom, unveiled in all their blackness and malice. "I am damned," will be the cry of every lost soul, "damned through my own fault. Like many others, I might have saved my soul and merited heaven's eternal reward. Surely I had grace in abundance; but I abused it, I resisted it; and so deceived myself."

If all this would but have an end! If, after even centuries of these most dreadful afflictions, if beyond there was a glimmer of hope, then would the greatest suffering be endurable. But, no. The lost souls are damned forever; hell is eternal. This stupendous truth astounds our reason and baffles our imagination. What must be the anguish and despair of the damned in presence of the fearful reality!

3. *We are in danger of being sentenced to spend eternity in hell.* If hell were the portion only of those monsters of iniquity who have shocked the world by their unspeakable crimes, then I might have some assurance of escaping their lot. Since to incur the penalty of hell it suffices that the soul, at the moment of death, be guilty of a single mortal sin.

And what is still more frightful but none the less true—it is possible for me to fall

into mortal sin and to die without becoming reconciled to God. Neither the loftiness of my vocation nor the holiness of the sacerdotal character nor the sublime functions of the priesthood will give me a sure guarantee against this possible danger.

Have I not passions that sometimes sorely try my powers of resistance and put the strength of my virtues to the test? And do I not frequently encounter temptations and seductions that may effect my fall? Yet one mortal sin is punished by hell eternal. Perhaps already in the course of my life I have actually fallen into grievous sin from which the grace of God has rescued me. Then let me fear lest another such fall should be unrepented and final. Did not the great and holy apostle of the Gentiles chastise his body and bring it into subjection for fear of hell? St. Augustine tells us that he was positively in fear of the eternal punishment of hell. *Timens terreo, ignem æternum timeo.*[1]

[1] In Ps. 80

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, do not allow me, like those who do not believe in hell or who at least turn their thoughts away from it, to live as if I had nothing to fear beyond the grave. But give me that salutary fear of divine justice which has ever been a great influence in the lives of thy saints, a powerful help to keep them faithful in thy divine service. If holy souls so strongly actuated by thy love have not neglected this means of strengthening themselves against temptation, how much more readily should I accept the fear of hell as a support since my feeble love needs to be strengthened!

In imitation of the saints, therefore, I sincerely wish to feel the influence of the fear of eternal damnation; not a base and servile fear but rather a filial disposition which, instead of excluding love, rather arouses and strengthens it.

Hell, disclosing the severity with which grievous sin is punished, will make me better understand how heinous is the violation of God's law; it will determine me to become more completely attached to God, more devoted to his service.

I resolve therefore:

1. To renew my faith in the dogma of hell;

2. By frequently thinking of its eternal suffering to endeavor to persevere in the state of grace.

From perpetual death, deliver us, O Lord.

XXII

HEAVEN

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God, thanking him for the knowledge that he has been pleased to reveal concerning the infinite blessedness which he has in store for us. With the assurance of faith we will contemplate and admire the genuine beauty of our eternal home.

II. We will consider the three distinguishing characteristics of our heavenly blessedness: it is certain, complete and eternal.

1. *The blessedness of heaven is certain.* Heaven is real. It is accessible to our efforts, the reward of a good life. And we are assured of possessing it if only we will it.

2. *The blessedness of heaven is complete;* a joy pure and unalloyed, the full satisfaction of every legitimate aspiration of our soul. We will there gratify our thirst for knowledge by possessing

Truth itself, and our longing for what is good by the possession of the sovereign Good.

3. *The blessedness of heaven is eternal.* Only permanent, unending blessedness can satisfy the longings of our being. Once in possession of God, we shall never more be separated from him.

III. We will confess that we think of heaven but seldom. Do not our actions belie our belief in heaven? We will ask our blessed Lord by his divine grace to enkindle in us an earnest longing for heaven.

We will resolve:

1. To recall more frequently the thought of our eternal reward;

2. To value the things of earth from heaven's point of view;

3. In order to merit heaven, never to refuse any sacrifice that God may ask of us.

Quam magna multitudo dulcedinis tuæ, Domine!

I. Adoration

Let us adore God, thanking him for the knowledge which he has been pleased to reveal concerning the infinite blessedness which he has in store for us. Although perfectly happy in himself, he has willed to share his bliss with creatures of his own hands, to let them partake of its plenitude. This present world is, indeed, the pouring out of his good-

ness, yet it is not a place of unalloyed happiness and complete repose, but a world of probation and labor. God, however, has not willed that our life here on earth should be all pain and sorrow. No. Through the created world in which we live and also by communicating himself to us directly, he has lightened our burden with joy and pleasure.

But these rays of happiness, however abundant they may be, are as nothing when compared with the blessedness reserved for us in heaven.

Let us elevate our thoughts above the sad realities of the present life and, forgetting earth with its vain pursuits and attractions, let us in spirit visit heaven, for which we are now struggling, heaven where we hope some day to reign. With the assurance of faith let us contemplate and admire the genuine beauty of this eternal home. There we behold the adorable Trinity face to face and see the unveiled mysteries of the Godhead; the sacred humanity also of the Word incarnate clothed in majesty and glory; Mary his blessed mother, too, and the angels of God; the entire assembly of the saints, praising and glorifying God. Let us honor the glorious Church in heaven, uniting our own to the adoration, blessings,

and praises which they offer to God, saying, in the words of the inspired writer: *To him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb, benediction, and honour, and glory, and power, forever and ever.*[1]

II. Considerations

Not only is heaven the aim of God's works but it is likewise the end toward which I should direct my whole life, to which I should aspire, to gain which I must constantly strive and sometimes suffer. We distinguish the blessedness of heaven from earthly goods and pleasures by three characteristics: it is certain, complete, and eternal.

1. *The blessedness of heaven is certain*, that is, it is real, it is accessible to my efforts, and I am assured of possessing it if only I desire it.

Heaven is real. I can not doubt that beyond the present life there is a heaven, that is to say, a blessed existence in which the soul will find repose. The voice of all mankind and the testimony of my own reason assure me most positively of the necessity of such

[1] Apoc. 5[13]

a life beyond the grave; for otherwise this world of ill proportioned good and evil would be an inexplicable enigma. Above all, God himself has proclaimed and confirmed this truth by the inspired word of Holy Writ and the teaching of his infallible Church.

Heaven is accessible to my efforts; it is for me that God created it, to be the reward of a good life. On the last day Jesus Christ will say: *Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*[1] And the Church, too, points out the legions of saints who once lived on this earth where I am passing my probation and whose efforts have been crowned with the eternal blessedness of heaven. What their perseverance has obtained, is likewise within my power; they have won heaven, and this conquest is not above my powers, aided by God's grace.

I am assured of possessing heaven if only I will it. It is this aspect of heaven that especially distinguishes it. It is the only object whose possession depends solely on my own will. The most energetic efforts to become learned may be frustrated; a consuming desire

[1] MATTH. 25[34]

for wealth and ceaseless effort to obtain it may at length see me a poor man; though I may have lofty ambition for honors, seek high offices, desire power and influence, yet I may be constrained to pass my whole life in obscurity; should I make pleasure and comfort my sole aim, I might nevertheless find after all more suffering and bitterness than happiness; in a word, nothing earthly is to be had with certainty for the mere wishing.

But sincerely and perseveringly to wish for heaven is to be sure of it. No deception or disappointment is possible. For whoever seeks God and the blessedness of his presence can not be deceived in the attempt. As heaven is the end and purpose of my life, the fruit of merit, it is impossible for me to fail except by my own fault. It is, in truth, this very certainty of possessing heaven that inspired the saints with so great courage and confidence.

2. *The blessedness of heaven is complete;* a joy pure and unalloyed, perfect and complete, the full satisfaction of every legitimate aspiration of my soul. This repose we do not find on earth, where we spend our life in ceaseless pursuits that never fully satisfy. For in heaven only shall we find the fulfilment of our desires, in heaven where our soul, possessing

the supreme Good, will finally rest from all its labor and seeking. Nothing more will it desire as it will thenceforward be absorbed in the enjoyment of that good, bestowed upon it in all fulness.

There will man gratify his intellectual aspirations by possessing the Truth itself. Clouds will no longer conceal the truth from the elect; for the mist which now permits the light to reach us but imperfectly will then be dispelled. This created world and its unexplained wonders, the depths of the supernatural order with its hidden mysteries, God himself and the transcendent perfections of his divine nature will be manifested to the saints. Thus will our thirst for knowledge be completely satisfied.

But the soul of man seeks more than truth, more than knowledge.

Are we not ever longing for what is good, do we not admire goodness as well as truth? And this longing will be satisfied only with the supreme Good, goodness complete, absolute, without the slightest imperfection, which, indeed, we shall find only in heaven. God, who made us for himself, is the only good that can make us perfectly happy. *Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord*, said St. Augustine, *and our heart will not rest until it repose in*

thee. But in heaven we shall enjoy this complete repose in God. Not only will our heavenly Father reveal himself to our understanding, but he will perfectly satisfy our longing for the complete and highest good.

The perfect joy of the saints in heaven will leave nothing to be desired—joy without sadness, bliss without grief, happiness without tears, satisfaction without longings, for God himself, infinite truth and goodness, will be the object and cause of our blessedness.

3. *The blessedness of heaven is eternal.* Within me I find a longing for happiness, for eternal happiness. The aspirations of my being, which will indeed be fulfilled in heaven, are of such a nature that only permanent, unending blessedness can satisfy them. Only infinite goodness and truth will give me this satisfaction. I wish to live forever, forever to be happy.

Everything here on earth is in perpetual change like the undulations of the sea, like passing shadows. But what I can not procure here below I will find in heaven. Over the entrance to this blessed home I read the word "Eternity." Yes, heaven will be eternal. Of this truth the teaching of revelation and Christian tradition leave no doubt, for they

picture heaven as an eternal reward, a life without end, a kingdom where death may not enter. Once in possession of my sovereign blessedness, I shall never more be separated from him. Without interruption shall I behold God, ever loving and praising him; and in this secure possession of supreme goodness itself, there will be no weariness or satiety. For the more I gaze upon the infinite perfections of God, the more will I discover therein to delight my soul. *He will be seen without end*, says St. Augustine, *he will be loved without tediousness, he will be praised without weariness.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

O my God, why is it that I think so little of heaven? It is indeed my end. Was I not created to enjoy its bliss, and was not life given me solely for the purpose, that I might merit heaven? My actions during my earthly sojourn should be directed toward this end, my consolation in discouragement, my strength in temptation and suffering. For the Chris-

[1] *City of God*, 22[30]

tian, judging things from the point of view of faith, earth is a place of probation and exile, of mingled joys and sorrows, a temporary abode to which we should not be wholly and ultimately attached; for the land of perfect blessedness, the permanent home which God in his love has prepared for us is heaven.

But do I always consider it in this light? Indeed I believe in the reality of heaven but do not my actions belie my belief? Does the thought of heaven exercise sufficient influence on my life? Yet this eternal union with God is really the end toward which I should direct everything. Have I imitated the saints, once men like myself but men who never lost sight of the heavenly recompense and who are now enjoying the reward of their persistent effort?

By thy grace, dear Lord, impress the thought of heaven on my mind, make me grow familiar with it and above all fill my heart with an earnest longing for my home in heaven, such a longing as enkindles the fire of thy love in the souls of thy friends, making the trials of this life become stepping-stones in my progress towards heaven. *Woe is me, that my sojourning is prolonged,* said the royal psalmist . . . *my soul hath been long a sojourner.*[1]

[1] Ps 119[5–6]

I resolve:

1. To recall more frequently the thought of my eternal reward;

2. To value the things of earth from heaven's point of view;

3. In order to merit heaven, never to refuse any sacrifice that God may ask of me.

Quam magna multitudo dulcedinis tuæ, Domine![1]

XXIII

THE VALUE OF GRACE

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God and thank him for his munificent gift of grace to all men, and especially to the children of the Catholic Church. He showers his grace upon us in a variety of ways.

II. To realize the value of grace, we will consider it in its source, its effects, and the end to which it leads us.

1. *Grace is a gift of God.* By a second creation, as it were, our heavenly Father associates us to the life of his Son. To merit grace for us, Jesus Christ suffered and died in human flesh. The Holy Ghost makes the divine grace penetrate our soul.

[1] Ps. 30[20]

2. *Without grace we can not perform any supernatural work.* Even in the natural order we can do very little towards salvation. But with grace everything is possible. It explains the eminent degree of perfection attained by the saints.

3. *Grace leads us to eternal glory.* Grace is a seed whose fruit is the blessedness of heaven. It is the road that leads to this end. To attain heaven nothing is so necessary as grace.

III. We will acknowledge that we have not appreciated the worth of God's grace. We will ask God to make us realize better the value of this great gift.

We will resolve:

1. Frequently to ask of God the help of his grace;

2. To thank him every day for the graces he has given us;

3. To make a serious effort to profit from all the graces we receive.

To everyone of us is given grace, according to the measure of the giving of Christ.[1]

I. Adoration

Let us adore God and thank him for the munificence with which he showers the precious gift of his grace upon men, upon all men. Even the unbeliever in the darkness of his

[1] Eph. 4[7]

infidelity is illumined by its salutary influence. Into his soul God sends some rays of divine light, feeble rays, to be sure, but strong enough to scatter the clouds that prevent him from contemplating the truth.

It is in the Catholic Church especially that God bestows his grace most profusely. Besides the sacraments, those inexhaustible fountains of divine grace, how many channels there are by which this gift of God is communicated to us! The sermons we hear, the pious conversations we share, the spiritual books we read, the religious exercises we practice, the ceremonies of the Church at which we assist, the good examples that cross our path, even the trials by which God wishes to bring us closer to him, are so many means that divine Providence uses to permeate our souls with his grace. It may be a sudden illumination or a pious movement of the will or a disgust for the vanities that formerly attracted us or a powerful impulse to love God.

Thus it is that God's mercy accompanies us at every moment. *Thy mercy,* says the Psalmist, *will follow me all the days of my life.*[1] Let us thank our blessed Lord for offering us so

[1] Ps. 22[6]

numerous means of salvation and sanctification. After acknowledging how poorly we have esteemed his grace and what meager fruit we have derived from it, let us ask him to make us better appreciate the incalculable value of this divine gift.

II. Considerations

To realize the value of grace, we must consider it: in its source, in its effects, and in the end to which it leads us.

1. *Grace is a gift of God.* In his merciful goodness and love our heavenly Father was not contented with creating us from nothingness, but by a second creation, as it were, he associated us to the life of his Son so that in him we might practice works of holiness. While destining us to such a sublime end, he has, by his eternal decree, prepared the graces that we need to attain it.

That we might possess the precious gift of grace, it was necessary for Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, to merit it for us. This he did by his suffering and death. To give us the blessings of nature it was enough for almighty God to speak the word. *He spoke, and*

they were made, says Holy Scripture, *he commanded, and they were created.*[1] But to procure grace for us the Word became man, suffered in human flesh, and even died on the cross. It is strictly true that the price of these graces which are given to me in such profusion is the blood of the God-Man, shed to cure, to fortify, and to sanctify my soul.

It is God the Holy Ghost who makes grace penetrate my soul, concealing his action under the appearance of external, visible agents, such as the sacramental symbols, objects blessed by the Church, the words of preachers, the ministry of pastors. Only the Holy Spirit can act on my soul, and it is to his mysterious influence I owe all the graces that make me do good.

2. *Without grace we can not perform any supernatural work.* So deep is the wound made by original sin that even in the natural order I can do very little by my own forces towards salvation. But with the help of grace everything is possible for us and to rise to the practice of the loftiest virtues no other help is needed. Says the great apostle: *I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me.*[2]

We admire the eminent degree of perfection

[1] Ps. 148[5]
[2] Philip. 4[13]

attained by the saints. And if we look for the cause we shall find that it is the grace of Jesus Christ, manifesting its all-powerful efficacy. *By the grace of God, I am what I am; and his grace in me hath not been void, but I have labored more abundantly than all they: yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*[1]

It is grace that made the saints. It sustains the martyrs in the sufferings they have to undergo. It inspires apostolic men with ardent zeal that makes them consecrate their lives to the salvation of their brethren. It prompts the purity of virgins. In short, it has been the principle of all the virtue practiced in the world or in the cloister.

We are right, therefore, in saying that with the help of grace we can do all things. This consideration makes us understand the priceless value of God's grace. Let us gratefully acknowledge our obligations to the Almighty for this gift of his bounty.

3. *Grace leads us to eternal glory.* Grace is a seed placed in our soul on earth, and its fruit is heavenly glory. As it develops and grows it makes us perform good acts and even acquire habits of virtue. The life of God takes possession of our soul little by little and

[1] I Cor. 15[10]

completely penetrates it, after expelling the life of sin. So, under the influence of grace, the soul is purified, perfected, made divine, as it were; it enters a state that is the beginning of glory.

Eternal blessedness is the aim of our life, and grace is the road that leads to it. Glory is our reward, and grace is the essential condition to merit it. Glory is to be our great treasure, and grace is the only price that can procure it. Although without the help of this divine gift I can do nothing for my salvation, yet when helped and supported by it, the smallest acts become meritorious or at least are means to that end.

If we were thoroughly convinced of these truths, how highly we would prize divine grace and how eagerly we would try to profit by it. The treasures of grace lie directly in our path but in our deplorable blindness we scarcely notice them. Let us ask God to make us realize in a practical way that to obtain heaven nothing is so necessary as grace.

III. Acts and Resolutions

My God, it is true that up to the present I have not understood the worth of thy grace.

Thy very prodigality, instead of provoking my grateful acknowledgment, has often been overlooked and even resisted. I should take to heart these words which thou didst address to the Samaritan woman: *If thou didst know the gift of God.*[1]

But this knowledge which will make me appreciate the grace of Jesus Christ at its just value is itself a grace that God alone can give me. Communicate it to me then, my Savior, make me understand the excellence of that grace which thou didst merit for us by all the sufferings of thy life, especially thy death on the cross. May I value it more than all earthly gifts and honors!

I resolve therefore:

1. Frequently to ask of God the help of his grace, especially in temptations and at the beginning of every undertaking;

2. To thank God every day for the graces that he has given me;

3. To make a serious effort to avail myself of all the graces that I receive.

To every one of us is given grace, according to the measure of the giving of Christ.[2]

[1] JOHN 4[10]
[2] EPH. 4[7]

XXIV

THE ABUSE OF GRACE

SUMMARY

I. We will adore our divine Master, who was always faithful to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. And we will honor the Blessed Virgin's fidelity to grace, her principal glory and merit.

II. We will consider:

1. *The abuse of grace* is the neglect or refusal to cooperate in producing the fruits of holiness for which God bestows it upon us. We may abuse grace by positive resistance, by inattention, and by inconstancy.

2. *The evil of abusing grace.* As it is the gift of God, we should receive it with respect. We can not despise the gift without offending the giver. In abusing divine grace, we are refusing to reap the fruit of Christ's sacrifice.

3. *The consequences of the abuse of grace.* It must be punished like any other sin. Some day we must give an account of the grace bestowed on us. There are three other special consequences: the loss of merit, spiritual insensibility, and the withdrawal of grace.

III. After reflecting on our failure to correspond generously to the many powerful means of sanctification placed at our disposal, we will confess that we have abused the grace of Jesus Christ.

We will ask our blessed Savior to make us faithful to all the graces with which he may favor us.

We will resolve:

1. To be attentive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit;

2. Often to examine ourselves on our correspondence with God's grace.

Vocavi et renuistis.

I. Adoration

Let us adore the soul of our divine Master faithful in adherence to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. According to the words of the prophet, this divine Spirit rested in the soul of Jesus and filled it with abundant gifts. *The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.*[1] In all the details of his life, our Lord was moved and directed by the Holy Spirit who, finding in his soul the most complete docility, exercised the grace of God in its plenitude to produce works of eminent holiness.

[1] Is. 11[2-3]

Next to Jesus, the most admirable model of fidelity to grace is Mary, his blessed mother. She was always docile to the voice of the Holy Spirit, attentive and obedient to its every whisper. Such is the secret of the high perfection that she attained, never refusing anything to grace but going from virtue to virtue, from sacrifice to sacrifice, continually perfecting the work of God within her and every day making herself more conformable to the image of her Son. In this was her perfection. It was this which made her so pleasing in the sight of God, rather than the extraordinary prerogatives bestowed upon her. Jesus himself said as much when in answer to a certain woman who cried out: *Blessed is the womb that bore thee*,[1] he replied: *Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it*.[2] Could he have better expressed that the principal glory and merit of his mother consisted not in having borne him but in having never abused his grace?

[1] LUKE 11[27]
[2] LUKE 11[28]

II. Considerations

To fortify ourselves against the danger of falling into the habit of grievously abusing the grace of God, let us consider in what the abuse of grace consists, why it is an evil, and what consequences generally follow.

1. *The abuse of grace* is the neglect or refusal to cooperate in producing the fruits of holiness for which God bestows it upon us. So we may be guilty of abusing grace in three ways: by positive resistance, by inattention, and by inconstancy.

Sometimes we abuse grace by *positive resistance.* The voice of God resounds at the ear of our heart and his light floods our mind, but in vain. We know what God asks of us and we refuse it. It is an open and obstinate strife between God, who invites, urges, begs, and the soul, which is enslaved by the passions, which stubbornly withstands God and uses the liberty he has given it as a defense against his approach. A soul guilty of such a resistance to grace is represented in the Gospel as a roadside where the seed fell but could not take root.

Sometimes we abuse grace by *inattention.* To profit by grace, it is necessary first of all to

recognize its presence. We must have our eye open to perceive the rays of light that come from God; we must have our ears attentive to the accents of his voice. How can we correspond to a grace that we do not notice? A light breath in the inmost depths of our soul, it is discerned only by those who have contracted the precious habit of living within themselves and of observing what takes place therein. So, for a great number of persons, the graces that God accords to them pass unperceived. The deplorable absence of reflection in their lives deprives them of the very thought of grace. God speaks to them but they do not hear. He multiplies the means for their salvation and sanctification, but they regard them not. He provides numerous occasions for them to enter into themselves, to abandon dissipation, but they pay no heed to these salutary appeals of grace. Like blind men, they are encompassed with light yet see not.

Sometimes we abuse grace by *inconstancy*. The inconstant soul hears the voice of God and yields to it. It puts a hand to the work, as it were, to accomplish what grace requires of it. In the fervor of a good prayer, in a thanksgiving after communion, under the powerful influence of a retreat, on the occasion of an

ordination or a forceful sermon, it takes some generous resolutions and even begins to put them into practice. But all this is merely ephemeral ardor. Soon the will, tired of the effort, grows weak and forgets its resolutions and the promises made to God; lukewarmness and indifference take the place of fervor; the grace received becomes useless.

2. *The evil of abusing grace.* Grace is a gift of God and so we should receive it with respect. We can not despise the gift without offending the giver. And how much more grievous our ingratitude appears when we bear in mind all that God has done to procure this divine help for us! To merit grace for us our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, came upon earth, suffered, and died. Grace is the fruit of redemption, the price of his blood.

St. Paul, comparing the transgressions of the Old Law with those of the law of grace, shows the latter are the more grave. *How much more, do you think he deserveth worse punishments, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath esteemed the blood of the testament unclean, by which he was sanctified, and hath offered an affront to the Spirit of grace?*[1]

Every time we close our ears to these invi-

[1] HEB. 10^{29}

tations that the Holy Ghost so frequently extends to us, every time we fail to profit by one of these countless means of sanctification that God showers on us, we despise the blood of Jesus Christ in as much as we refuse to reap the fruit of his sacrifice by availing ourselves of his precious blood shed for our salvation.

3. *The consequences of the abuse of grace.* It must be punished like any other sin. Some day God will require an account of the natural and supernatural gifts that he has bestowed on us in the whole course of our life, and we shall be rewarded or punished according to the good or bad use we have made of them. Besides this result, there are three other special consequences of the abuse of grace: the loss of merit spiritual insensibility, and the withdrawal of grace.

The abuse of grace causes *the loss of merit*, merit which otherwise would accumulate day after day. The faithful soul steadily increases its treasure of merit. It is docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and acts of virtue multiply indefinitely. Never does it fail to offer to God the sacrifices that he asks. By failing to correspond to grace, the unfaithful soul is deprived of these precious merits. By distraction, neglect, perhaps even positive opposition, it renders the gifts of God useless.

Its spiritual life is spent in poverty though the riches of grace lie all about it.

The abuse of grace causes *spiritual insensibility*, that deplorable condition in which nothing that concerns a soul's salvation can exert any influence and the most forcible sermons, the most powerful means of sanctification are without effect. A soul in this condition is well on the way to hardness of heart and final impenitence.

Such a soul lives and breathes in an atmosphere of grace without perceiving it. While its delicacy is developed and perfected by compliance with divine inspirations, it is destroyed by resistance to God's grace. By a sleep or paralysis, as it were, we lose God's point of view and that of our salvation, by a sleep sometimes so profound that it would require a miracle to arouse us.

The abuse of grace leads to *its withdrawal.* After knocking for a long time at the heart to gain admission, God finally withdraws. His voice no longer entreats us. He puts an end to solicitations that are rendered useless by the infidelity or neglect of those to whom they are addressed.

This is what the Gospel teaches us by the example of the slothful servant who neglected to use the talent which his master entrusted to

him. It was taken from him and given to the profitable servant who had placed his talents out at interest. *To every one that hath*, said our Savior, *shall be given, and he shall abound: and from him that hath not, even that which he hath, shall be taken from him.*[1]

It is true that God never entirely withdraws his grace from us; the greatest sinners are never altogether deprived of it. While he showers it in profusion upon those who turn it to good account, to those who abuse it he gives it but sparingly. Especially does he deprive them of those choice graces, so precious for salvation, which he generally accords only to those who make themselves worthy. This is the most terrible punishment that God can inflict during the present life.

III. Acts and Resolutions

All during my life, how lavishly thou hast bestowed thy graces upon me, O my God. How many more worthy have been less favored with thy gifts. Thou hast reached the climax of generosity in giving me the grace of a priestly vocation.

[1] Luke 19[26]

What profit have I derived from so many powerful means of sanctification which thou hast placed at my disposal? Must I not confess that I have been guilty of a deplorable abuse of grace? What of the pious exercises omitted or carelessly performed, good resolutions rendered ineffective? After having received so many graces, if I had faithfully corresponded to them, I might now have attained a high degree of holiness.

My Jesus, I have abused thy grace; I have closed my ear to thy voice and my eye to the divine light. Often thou hast called me and I have made no response. How often have I not had reason to fear thou wouldst tire of my resistance and wouldst abandon me to my own weakness!

Perhaps this dreadful punishment has already visited me. Have I become less sensible to the things of God? Does the holy word of God impress my soul more feebly? Are good inspirations becoming rare and weak? Is holy communion ceasing to affect my heart? These terrible symptoms are indications of the diminution of divine grace.

My Jesus, do not permit such a calamity to befall me. Make me docile to the graces thou dost heap on me, grant that I may faithfully

correspond to thy inspirations and never refuse any sacrifice the Holy Spirit may ask of me.

I resolve therefore:

1. To be attentive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit;

2. Often to examine myself on my correspondence with God's grace.

Vocavi et renuistis.[1]

XXV

CONVERSION

SUMMARY

I. We will adore our Lord Jesus Christ who consecrated his entire being to the service of his heavenly Father. In the souls of most holy men we find a conversion to God at some time during their life. We will adore the wonderful power of divine grace in the work of conversion.

II. To realize the importance of conversion to God, we will consider that:

1. *To defer our conversion is a grave evil.* We thereby knowingly and deliberately resist the grace offered us and grievously contemn God's majesty.

[1] PROV. 1^{24}

We are confiding in God's mercy in order to offend him.

2. *To defer our conversion is most contradictory.* How can we explain the perversity of one who defers the reform of his life? He practically says: "I will reform, but not to-day."

3. *To defer our conversion is a serious imprudence;* for we are not sure of eventually having that opportunity on which we are reckoning. Nothing is more uncertain than the future, and so we may not have time. We may also lack the necessary means, such as the use of our faculties. Can we be sure that our desire to reform will persist?

III. We will acknowledge our want of fidelity in corresponding to God's grace, our failure to be whole-heartedly converted to his service. We will ask Christ for the grace of generous conversion and complete reform.

We will resolve:

1. Henceforth to renounce whatever is displeasing to Jesus Christ;

2. To combat energetically the bad inclinations that lead us into sin;

3. To work toward the acquisition of those virtues which we know God especially requires of us.

Delay not to be converted to the Lord, and defer it not from day to day.

I. Adoration

Let us adore our Lord Jesus Christ who during his whole life on earth, acknowledged

God as the sovereign good and, by ceaseless acts of love and adoration, consecrated his entire being to the service of his heavenly Father. Let us honor Mary's fidelity as also that of all the saints who, in different degrees, have been obedient to the voice of God calling them to his service.

There are a few who seem to have heard that voice almost from the beginning of their life, in whom the grace of baptism develops without hindrance. They appear exempted from the general corruption, so completely are they subject to the influence of divine grace. These men, pious and holy even from childhood, continually progress from virtue to virtue. Such, for example, were St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, St. Dominic, St. Francis de Sales.

In the souls of others, however, we find there is a conversion to God later on in life. Thus we find that the apostles were all absorbed with the cares of their various professions and occupations, not in the least expecting the eminence of the vocation for which they were predestined, when Jesus Christ called them to be his disciples. *Leaving all things, they followed him.*[1]

[1] LUKE 5[11]

On one occasion, when Jesus perceived the publican Zaccheus, who out of curiosity had climbed up into a tree to see him, the Master called him, saying: *This day I must abide in thy house.*[1] Zaccheus was converted and our Savior declared: *This day is salvation come to this house.*[2] In the lives of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Ignatius, and St. Francis Xavier we see most striking examples of conversion to God.

Sometimes, indeed, the victory of grace seems to be immediate. But more often there is a struggle, more or less prolonged, and the grace of God, before accomplishing its triumph, has to surmount many difficulties, suppress revolts, and overcome hesitation and doubt.

Let us adore the wonderful power manifested by the grace of Jesus Christ in conversions to God's friendship and service. And let us ask him to grant that we too may yield to the influence of his grace.

II. Considerations

Whoever has preserved a spark of Christian faith in his heart must be convinced of the

[1] Luke 19[5]
[2] Luke 19[9]

necessity of dying in the state of grace and hence of the need of turning whole-heartedly to God before leaving this world. But we should be disposed to do this now. To see the truth of this, let us reflect that to defer our conversion is: 1. a grave evil; 2. a contradiction; 3. a serious imprudence.

1. *To defer our conversion is a grave evil.* The soul which, though convinced of the necessity of turning to God, puts off the fulfilment of this duty to some later time and continues meanwhile to live in sin incurs very serious guilt.

In the first place he knowingly and deliberately resists the grace offered to him, thus abusing this divine gift. Besides, he contemns God's majesty most grievously. It is, in truth, as if he said: "My God, I know thou deservest all adoration, the homage of my whole being, and some day I will indeed turn to thee; I know that sin is a great evil, the very greatest, in fact, an act of monstrous ingratitude to thee, and some day I will abandon it to enter thy service; I know thou art my blessedness, my last end; I wish to enter heaven when I leave this world, and some day I will begin to act as if I really were not to sojourn here forever. All these truths I be-

lieve and I have decided to put them into practice before I die, when I can no longer enjoy the pleasures of sin. But in the meantime, to satisfy my own inclinations, I will offend thee, my God, at pleasure, I will despise thy laws, I will give myself up to sinful inclinations and will centre my affections in things of earth without a thought of thee; for surely I shall have time enough to reform and do penance." Such is the language that fairly interprets the conduct of one who postpones his conversion.

The sinner who acts thus is confiding in God's mercy in order to offend him. If he thought the punishment due to his sins would follow immediately, would he not at once change his life? But he trusts that the merciful goodness of God will not cut him off in his sins. God is patient, he seems to say, he will give me the grace of conversion and time to do penance; he will not let me die in sin. Thus, my God, do we abuse thy generous mercy, assuring ourselves of security that we may persist in our sinfulness.

2. *To defer our conversion is most contradictory.* We recognize consistency in a sinner who is willing to live and die at enmity with God. The weakness of human nature explains

the fluctuations of a soul yielding now to grace and now to the attraction of sin.

But how can we explain the perversity of one who defers the reform of his life? He recognizes the evil of his sinful state, understands the danger, and is resolved to abandon sin some day; but for the present he is willing to remain in sin. Does he not practically say: "I will reform but not to-day; of course I must renounce sin sometime but just now I wish to commit it?" Is not this most contradictory? For my reform later on will be a disavowal of my present life. If it is to be serious, it means sincere regrets for my faults and the abandonment of sin. To postpone my reform is to commit sin while wishing to repent of it, to enjoy offending God while wishing to condemn the offense, to decide upon a future disavowal of what I deliberately perform now.

3. *To defer our conversion is a serious imprudence.* We postpone our return to God. But are we sure of eventually having that opportunity on which we are reckoning? Surely there is nothing more uncertain than the future. God alone knows how long we will live. Perhaps our probation will end in a few days. Not infrequently death comes to a man who

is planning for many years to come; years which he is destined never to realize. In like manner may our reform in the more or less distant future be frustrated. What imprudent folly it is, then, not to profit by the present time to reform our lives instead of putting off such conversion to a future that perhaps may not be accorded us.

We must be sure not only of time for our reform but also of the means. But can we assure ourselves that at some far distant time we will enjoy the full use of our faculties required for this great act of conversion? Perhaps enfeebled by illness, incapable of any serious application, we may be deprived of the external aids which at present we have in abundance, we may be reduced to such a state of powerlessness that our return to God, if not impossible, will at least be extremely difficult.

Now, to reform not only the ability but the desire to do so is needful. What we will not resolve to do now, are we sure that we will perform later? We shall need the powerful grace of God to help us renounce our sinful habits, to detach us from sin by an act of true repentance, and to love God with our whole heart. And what assurance can we have that this grace will be accorded us then? Will the

Holy Spirit, whose inspirations we have so often rejected, again revisit us after such deliberate resolves on our part to repel his grace? Let us take to heart these words of Holy Writ: *Because I called, and you refused: I stretched out my hand, and there was none that regarded. You have despised all my counsel, and have neglected my reprehensions. . . . . When sudden calamity shall fall on you, and destruction, as a tempest, shall be at hand: when tribulation and distress shall come upon you: then shall they call upon me and I will not hear.*[1] The postponement of our conversion may lead to final impenitence.

III. Acts and Resolutions

I am not, dear Lord, among those who declare themselves thy enemies and who are willing to live and to die in blasphemy and impiety. Wherefore then does it happen that, despite the repeated invitations of thy grace and the reproaches of my own conscience, I put off giving myself to thee? I am trust-

[1] Prov. 1[24–28]

ing that a time will come when I will determine, so to speak, to turn over a new leaf, as if, indeed, later on I should have more powerful motives for reforming my life than I now have, as if I should not have to overcome the same obstacles that now restrain me, as if I should not have to make the same persistent effort then as now. Am I drifting along with attachments to sin that I fail to overcome? Weeks and months and even years pass by and still I find myself subject to the same regrettable weaknesses which I have long since wished to see corrected; but I defer to some other time the execution of my desires of reform.

My Savior, grant me the grace of generously offering myself to thee, that grace which led St. Augustine from a sinful life to one centered in thy love. He too hesitated long, solicited by thy grace and at the same time attracted by the alluring pleasures of sin. In painful uncertainty, he cried out: "Soon but not now." At last he corresponded to thy invitation and gave himself wholly and unreservedly to thee. Lord, grant that I may imitate St. Augustine in his conversion to thy service, that after his example I may have the courage to sacrifice everything for thee.

I resolve therefore:

1. Henceforth to renounce whatever is displeasing to Jesus Christ;

2. To combat energetically the bad inclinations that lead me into sin;

3. To work for the acquisition of those virtues which I know God especially requires of me.

Delay not to be converted to the Lord, and defer it not from day to day.[1]

XXVI

MOTIVES OF PERSEVERANCE

SUMMARY

I. We will adore the almighty and unchanging Lord of creation, whose will is ever firm in its decisions. Through the varying world of creatures is revealed the Uncreated. In humble admiration we will reflect upon this model of perfect perseverance.

II. We will consider the necessity of perseverance:

1. *From the very reasons which determined our conversion to God.* Reason and faith were the motives that persuaded us to correspond to God's

[1] Ecclus. 5[8]

grace. As the great fundamental truths that influenced us must remain eternally true, our conversion ought to be irrevocable.

2. *From reasons derived from our very conversion.* God has bestowed his most precious gifts upon us. If we should again become lax and lukewarm, would we not be doubly guilty? If we do not persevere, we will lose the advantage of our conversion. What a misfortune it would be to render our past efforts and struggles useless by lack of perseverance!

III. We will acknowledge our indebtedness to the grace of God for our present good dispositions. After declaring before God our determination to persevere, we will implore the help of his grace.

We will resolve:

1. Frequently to ask of God the grace of perseverance;

2. To guard against the first signs of laxity and tepidity.

He that shall persevere unto the end, he shall be saved.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God, whose life had no beginning and will have no end, whose perfections are unchangeable, whose will, directed by infinite wisdom, is not subject to capricious variation. *Thou art always the selfsame, and thy*

years shall not fail.[1] With unwavering firmness he carries out his decrees; *with whom there is no change, nor shadow of alteration.*[2] He encounters no resistance, no obstacle, no discouragement that can interfere with the fulfilment of his divine will. *I am the Lord, and I change not.*[3]

His interior life is a simple but perfect act performed from eternity without cessation or change. It is the contemplation, love, and possession of himself.

He is exteriorly manifested in the work of creating and sustaining the universe which, however, changes, develops, and progresses according to the plan willed by God from all eternity. Through the varying world of creatures is revealed the eternal immutability of the Uncreated.

In humble admiration, let us reflect upon this model of perfect perseverance. Let us praise and exalt his infinite perfections. Let us rejoice that he alone is not affected by the changing vicissitudes which influence everything here below. Let us ask of him the grace

[1] Ps. 101[28]
[2] James 1[1]
[3] Mal. 3[6]

to continue perseveringly in his love, even unto eternal life.

II. Considerations

Two considerations will show us the necessity of faithful and unwavering perseverance in God's love.

1. *The reasons which determined our conversion* to God prompt our perseverance. The consoling dispositions of our soul at the time of our conversion to God were not the result of imagination or fickle enthusiasm. Reason and faith persuaded us to correspond to the grace of God, to *be penitent . . . and be converted.*[1] As our good dispositions were produced by a deep and solid conviction after much serious reflection, our conversion ought therefore to be enduring.

What reason could we have for returning to the state of sin from which we have been rescued by the grace of God? Why should we forget or neglect what we now consider our most important duties of life? These fundamental truths that appear now so neces-

[1] Acts 3[19]

sary will not cease to be true to-morrow; they are eternal as God himself, and not subject to change. It will always be true that the only end of our mortal life is to know, to love, and to serve God above all things; that sin, which turns us away from this end, is the greatest evil and the most deplorable misfortune; that death is bound to overtake us, and after that heaven or hell.

As these great fundamental truths must ever remain unalterable, would it not be unreasonable for us to fail to make them the rule of our life? If the salvation of our immortal soul is the important concern during our probation on earth, should we not work persistently for this end, should we not persevere in the avoidance of sin and the practice of virtue so as to avoid the eternal punishment of hell and merit the unending blessedness of heaven?

Let us reflect, therefore, that the motives which sometime ago led us to renounce sin and devote ourselves generously to the service of God, should induce us to persevere faithfully therein.

2. *Additional reasons* impose on us a still more pressing and sacred obligation to remain faithful to our resolutions.

God, in rescuing us from sin and calling us

to his service, has testified his love and mercy in a special manner. Not only did he pardon our offences, but he has showered divine consolations upon us, he has bestowed on us his most precious gifts. Guided by divine light and urged on by the grace of God, we have understood the necessity of becoming fervent Christians. If, in spite of all this, we should again become lax and negligent and lukewarm, would we not be doubly guilty? Might it not be said of us: *the last state of that man becomes worse than the first?*[1] Perhaps the sins that we have had to regret and that God has forgiven were the effect of impulse and lack of reflection rather than of malice and deliberation; perhaps we did not appreciate their gravity. Might we not in a certain way say with the apostle of the Gentiles *Ignorans feci?* But if now we become unfaithful to God, how could we allege the same excuse?

Moreover, if we do not persevere, we will lose the advantages of our conversion. When we returned to God we experienced the fervor of his love and with it the peace of a good conscience, surpassing all the goods that the

[1] Luke 11[26]
[2] I Tim. 1[13]

world can give us. These advantages should be cherished the more carefully as they are the fruit of our work and effort.

To reform our life we had to struggle vigorously against the evil inclinations of our nature, we had to submit to many sacrifices, to overcome many temptations, and to undergo many trials. It has been difficult for us to meditate on the great truths that we had forgotten, to examine our conscience, to arouse contrition for our sins, to make an entire and sincere confession, to take a firm resolution to live more in accordance with the holiness of our vocation.

What a misfortune it would be to render all those efforts and struggles useless by lack of perseverance! After a few days we would be in the same condition as we were before, lax and lukewarm in the service of God, negligent and careless in fulfilling our duties; we would be subject to the same faults, slaves of the same habits. In vain would we have been converted, in vain would we have done penance. We would be like a sick man who by a painful effort raises his head from the pillow only to fall back weaker than before.

Now is the time for us to make a strong

resolution to persevere. When shall we be more fervently disposed? When shall we have more grace to help us? We may well fear that, if we abuse the present grace of God, he will not continue his helps, that he will abandon us.

III. Acts and Resolutions

By thy grace, O my God, thou hast inspired me with the good will which I feel now. Do not permit me to lose the precious treasure that I possess. Give my will that firmness and generosity which it needs to show itself ever faithful to thy divine inspirations. Grant that the seed of thy grace which has fallen upon my heart may find not a barren ungrateful soil but a fertile ground which will produce fruit a hundred fold.

I wish, good Lord, to persevere, I wish to remain faithful in the seminary, in the priesthood, even to the very moment of my death. If, before I was converted to thy service, I was unfortunately in the state of sin, I will now keep thy grace inviolable in the depth of my heart. If I was lax and lukewarm, I will henceforth serve thee with all the fervor that

love inspires. If I have been fervent, I will strive to become more devoted and to attain more fully that perfection to which thou hast called me. Help me by thy grace.

I resolve therefore:

1. Frequently to ask of God the grace of perseverance;

2. To guard against the first signs of laxity and tepidity.

He that shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved.[1]

XXVII

OBSTACLES TO PERSEVERANCE

SUMMARY

I. We will adore Jesus Christ and thank him for offering us during his mortal life a perfect model of perseverance. His whole life is the manifestation of a persevering and uninterrupted union of his soul to God. This meant sacrifice, suffering, humiliation, even the death of the cross.

II. We will consider the three principal kinds of obstacles to be overcome in the work of perseverance.

[1] MATTH. 24[13]

1. *Our human frailty.* It is a natural tendency to relapse, to relax effort, for our will is weak and inconstant while our passions incline us to sin. Negligence steals upon us unawares and easily develops into lukewarmness.

2. *The difficulty of perseverance itself.* There are some difficulties inherent to the work of Christian perfection, others come from our temptations and still others arise when supernatural consolations are withdrawn.

3. *The influence of our surroundings.* The example of our brethren may unconsciously lead us into remissness and relaxation. To this is sometimes added the weight of their advice. Equally baneful is the effect of human respect on our actions, making us miserably subservient to the opinions of others.

III. We will confess that we have been seriously wanting in perseverance. We can recall many new starts that we have made. We will determine, with the help of God's grace, to guard the approaches to remissness.

We will resolve:

1. To pray for the grace of perseverance;

2. To exercise strict vigilance over the influences opposed to our perseverance.

Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation.

I. Adoration

Let us adore Jesus Christ and thank him for offering us during his mortal life a perfect model

of perseverance. Once united to God by an act of love at his entrance into this world, the soul of Jesus was never more separated from his heavenly Father. His whole life in time and in eternity is but the manifestation of that persevering and uninterrupted love of God, which might well be expressed by these words of the psalmist: *What have I in heaven? and besides thee what do I desire upon earth? . . . . Thou art the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion for ever.*[1] Nothing could be more irrevocable than the resolution of Christ to conform in all things to the will of God, to make it the law of his life. *My meat is to do the will of him that sent me,*[2] he said to his disciples.

Often did he find it hard and painful to fulfil his Father's will. It meant sacrifice, suffering, humiliation, even the death of the cross. When he entered Gethsemani with some of his disciples on that first Holy Thursday, *he began to fear and to be heavy. And he saith to them: My soul is sorrowful even unto death.*[3] But the courage of our blessed Savior was not

[1] PS. 72[25–26]
[2] JOHN 4[34]
[3] MARK 14[33–34]

weakened. He refused not the bitter chalice of suffering which his Father presented to him. *Not what I will, but what thou wilt,*[1] was his prayer. And did he not carry the cross on which he was to offer up his life? When he was on the point of completing the sacrifice, confident that he had accomplished everything prescribed by God's holy will, confident of his unbroken perseverance in the love of God during his entire life on earth, he was able to say: *It is consummated,*[2] as he had said the night before: *I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.*[3] As the Apostle Paul says: *He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.*[4] Thus did our divine Master display the extent of his persevering conformity to the will of God.

With admiring love let us adore Jesus for his immutable constancy not only in his outward acts but especially in the perfect dispositions of his soul. And let us say in the inspired words of the evangelist: *The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive . . . honour, and glory, and benediction.*[5]

[1] Mark 14[36]
[2] John 19[30]
[3] John 17[4]
[4] Philip. 2[8]
[5] Apoc. 5[12]

II. Considerations

There are three kinds of obstacles to be overcome in our work of perseverance: our human frailty, which easily lets us relapse into sin; the difficulty of perseverance itself; the influence of our surroundings, especially sinful attractions.

1. *Our human frailty,* prone to relaxation. That our tendency to relapse is dangerous since its influence is almost imperceptible, is a truth we may readily perceive after a moment's reflection. While resistance to temptation and advancement in perfection require on our part a positive volition or effort, precise, determined, and energetic; on the other hand, to fall into remissness, tepidity, even into sin, we need but fail to will the contrary, we need only forego our watchfulness, we need only yield to the evil tendencies of our tainted nature. For our inclination to sin is a current against which we must struggle if we would not be engulfed.

The greatest obstacle in the way of our perseverance is the weakness and inconstancy of our will which to-morrow may retract what to-day it resolves, which may have lofty as-

pirations to perfection but seldom puts them into practice.

Then, too, our passions frequently get the better of us. They incline us to yield to our nature's tendencies, both evil and good. If we but trace many of our falls to their origin we shall realize that some passion or other is frequently betraying us into sin.

What will eventually happen if we do not more carefully watch and direct our natural inclinations? Undoubtedly we shall not at once fall into grievous sin; but our slight faults will become more numerous, the neglect of certain duties will become habitual, the spirit of sacrifice and mortification will become dead in us, our thoughts and speech will be unbridled, our actions unguarded. Moreover—and herein lies the most serious danger—this negligence will excite no remorse in our soul, for it will steal upon us, as it were, unawares. We may soon reach the state of lukewarmness; and often this unfortunate condition is but the foreshadowing of a soul's final ruin.

2. *The difficulty of perseverance itself.* Christian perfection would not be meritorious if we could attain to it without effort. It is necessary, therefore, if we would persevere, to prepare for an energetic struggle. Fidelity

to prayer, sustained application to the duties of our state, watchfulness over our senses and imagination, continual regard for silence and recollection, observance of the rule, all these practices after awhile become difficult.

The devil may return with seven other spirits more wicked than himself. New assaults will be made on our soul and will have to be met by an energy proportioned to the vigor of the attack. Says St. Paul: *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it.*[1] It is well for us to foresee this danger to our perseverance.

Perhaps the action of divine grace in our soul brings with it sweet consolations, so that nothing seems arduous to us. But we can not expect these impressions of grace to remain; before long we are almost sure to feel their loss. And when deprived of this help, will we be so courageous, so generous as we are now? When no longer experiencing God's presence in our soul, when apparently abandoned to our own weak selves, will we not be in danger of yielding, of becoming dis-

[1] I Cor. 10[13]

couraged? These are genuine obstacles that we must prepare to encounter if we would persevere.

3. *The influence of our surroundings.* One of the strongest influences upon our conduct is *the example of friends.* If they are imprudent and inconsiderate, they may, unconsciously perhaps, lead us into remissness and relaxation by the power of their example. We may discover in them slight imperfections, occasional thoughtlessness in their speech, an attitude of indifference towards the rule. So we conclude that all these little defects are not so reprehensible as we once deemed them. It is then an easy matter to let these same imperfections creep into our own conduct.

Sometimes the weight of *their advice* is added to the force of their example. Perhaps they tell us we are too scrupulous in the observance of minor rules, that we exaggerate the perfection required in our state, that after all there is no sin in such or such an omission. The danger of such example is the greater as we are the less on our guard against it.

No less to be feared than the example of indifference is the effect of *human respect* on our actions. It is especially humiliating to confess that we have not the courage of our

convictions, that we are miserably subservient to the opinions of others.

We are thoroughly convinced that we need to be regular, pious, and devoted to the work of our training. We believe that Jesus Christ requires great sacrifices and labor from us if we are to prepare satisfactorily for the great work to which he has called us. Has some one smiled at our regularity; has some one ridiculed our so called scrupulosity or our good resolutions that have been prompted by the grace of God? And are the principles of our conduct and our convictions going to yield to the ill considered flippancy of our neighbor? In spite of the voice of conscience, in spite of our good resolves, in spite of the grace of God and merely for appearance sake, shall we do what we know we should avoid, shall we omit what the word of God, our faith, and our reason direct us to perform? St. John says of the chief men among the Jews who believed in Christ but were afraid to confess him: *They loved the glory of men more than the glory of God.*[1] The apostles, however, when the high priest ordered them to discontinue their preaching, replied to him in

[1] JOHN 12[43]

the presence of the council: *We ought to obey God, rather than men.*[1]

III. Acts and Resolutions

A cursory glance at my past life will suffice to show me to what extent I have been wanting in perseverance. I know the obstacles that I must encounter if I wish to continue in the fervor of thy love, O my God. Why is it that my retreats heretofore have not been more fruitful? Why, despite good resolutions, was I at the end of a few weeks in very much the same state as before the retreat? A little reflection enables me to see that my perseverance encountered some of the obstacles which I have been considering and that, instead of overcoming the opposition, I gave way to it.

I wish, therefore, my Jesus, with the help of thy grace, vigilantly to guard the approaches to remissness and to watch more sedulously over my senses, my imagination, my heart. I humbly confess my weakness and inconstancy and I promise to take every precaution against relaxation which past experience shows

[1] Acts 5[29]

to be necessary. Attentive vigilance over myself and faithful examination of conscience will reveal the first signs of relaxation; and, by the help of thy grace, I will have the strength and courage to combat them.

I shall meet numerous difficulties that I must oppose vigorously. There will be discouragements, failures, fresh starts, renewed resolutions, but I intend to withstand firmly every influence that may lead me into relaxation, whether it come from my own nature, from the intrinsic difficulty of perseverance, or from sources without.

In order to triumph over these various obstacles, I will have recourse to prayer, the essential condition of perseverance as it is of every true reform.

I resolve therefore:

1. To pray for the grace of perseverance;

2. To exercise strict vigilance over the influences opposed to my perseverance.

Watch ye, and pray that ye enter not into temptation.[1]

[1] MATTH. 26[41]

XXVIII

SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

SUMMARY

I. We will adore God who in his infinite wisdom has imposed the law of progress upon all the works of his hands. We will adore the realization of this divine law in Jesus Christ.

II. We will consider the obligation of spiritual progress as we learn it from:

1. *The word of God.* Throughout the Holy Scriptures we find the law of progress inscribed again and again.

2. *The example of the saints.* Progress has been the general rule that they followed. Once started on the way of holiness, they constantly advanced from virtue to virtue, from perfection to perfection.

3. *The conditions of the Christian life.* Two contrary forces persistently solicit our will: our weak and fallen nature inviting us to sin, and the grace of God urging us to all that is good and virtuous. The former if not opposed by constant efforts to advance, will cause our ruin. If we do not follow the latter, we are abusing God's grace.

III. We will ask ourselves whether the law of progress is the rule of our spiritual life. We will ask of Christ the grace to grow steadily in his love and to develop the supernatural life of our soul.

We will resolve:

1. From day to day to strive vigorously to develop or increase some particular virtue;
2. To take advantage of every occasion to offer some sacrifice to Christ;
3. From time to time to discover by self-examination whether we have made any progress in the spiritual life.

Let us in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ.

I. Adoration

Let us adore God who, in his infinite wisdom, has imposed the law of progress upon all the works of his hands, that is a law of constant approach to perfection. We adore the realization of this divine plan in Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate. Only by degrees were the treasures of grace, of knowledge, of wisdom, and of holiness manifested by the divine Redeemer to the world about him. For, according to the gospel narrative, *Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men.*[1] Jesus in the crib, veiling all his perfections under the feeble helplessness of in-

[1] Luke 2[52]

fancy, and Jesus in his glory, almighty God, receiving the adoration and praise of heaven and earth; such are the two extremes of his progress and between them the mysteries of his life at Nazareth, his public ministry, his ignominious suffering and death, the triumph of his resurrection and ascension.

Let us reflect upon Jesus' progress through these different states. We see him in shame and glory, in obscurity and in grandeur, in grief and in joy, as our Redeemer and our God.

II. Considerations

All Christians, particularly those called by God to a state of special holiness, are under obligation to follow the law of uninterrupted progress in the spiritual life, to rise higher and higher without stopping or going backward, to constantly tend to higher and higher perfection. We learn of this obligation from: 1. the teaching of God's word; 2. the example of the saints; 3. the conditions of the Christian life.

1. *The word of God. The path of the just,* says Holy Writ, *as a shining light, goeth for-*

wards and increaseth even to perfect day.[1] But it is especially in the Holy Gospel that we find this law most clearly stated. *I have chosen you,* said our Lord, *and have appointed you, that you should go, and should bring forth fruit.*[2]

Our Lord compares the Christian to a merchant who is always working to grow richer: *Trade till I come,*[3] to a servant whose duty it is to increase his talent; to a laborer working in the vineyard until the close of day.

Again he compares the Christian life to a seed planted in good soil, growing and bringing forth abundant fruit.

As a model of perfection toward which we should unceasingly strive, Christ points to God himself. *Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.*[4]

This law of spiritual progress is at the very foundation of St. Paul's moral teaching. He believed that at baptism a germ of supernatural life is planted in the Christian soul, a germ that must develop and grow. This growth, moreover, consists in the production of virtuous acts; *fruitful in every good work,*

[1] PROV. 4[18]
[2] JOHN 15[16]
[3] LUKE 19[13]
[4] MATTH. 5[48]

and increasing in the knowledge of God,[1] as St. Paul says, *always abounding in the work of the Lord*.[2]

Now, the end toward which we should progress by this labor is Jesus Christ the God-man, whose life we have received in holy baptism; he is our ideal of holiness, the exemplar of every virtue, the model which we should constantly imitate. Let us endeavor every day to reproduce in our own lives some of the traits that we find in the life of our divine Master. Let us Christians *grow up in him who is the head, even Christ*.[3] Like an artist who keeps adding new touches to his painting until he has reproduced the ideal of his conception, so we must ceaselessly perfect the divine work in our soul so as more and more nearly to approach the ideal which is placed before us for imitation.

2. *The example of the saints.* Says St. Paul: *Forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth myself to those that are before, I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ Jesus*.[4] Like this has

[1] COLOSS. 1[10]
[2] I COR. 15[58]
[3] EPHES. 4[15]
[4] PHILIP. 3[13–14]

been the general rule of life adopted by all the saints and followed in their conduct with great fidelity. Once started on the way of holiness, they never halted, but constantly progressed from virtue to virtue, from perfection to perfection, but always valuing what they had done as nothing when compared with what they felt obliged to do.

As a traveler who ascends a mountain discovers that his range of vision becomes more and more extended, so the saints, as they grew in perfection, found new horizons of sanctity open out before them. Their life was a constant progress. No matter what height of virtue they attained, their holy ambition aspired to still loftier holiness. Never did they think they had reached a satisfactory degree of perfection.

We notice this spiritual development more particularly in the saints of modern times, whose lives we can trace, as it were, step by step. We see them offering themselves to God, growing in his grace from day to day, practicing more complete detachment from the world, more ardent and generous love for God and for their neighbor. By the habit of prayer and recollection, their union with God has become more intimate. Their nature has

been gradually altered, their life has been elevated by the life of Christ, according to St. Paul's expression: *That the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our mortal flesh.*[1] According as they progressed towards their ideal, the exterior man grew weak while their interior life was fortified. *Though our outward man is corrupted,* says the great apostle, *yet the inward man is renewed day by day.*[2]

Thus do the saints of God teach us how our spiritual life should follow a law of constant progress. The end which they have actually attained is that towards which our own efforts must be directed.

3. *The conditions of the Christian life.* There are two contrary forces persistently soliciting our will: our weak and fallen nature with its depraved inclinations which expose it to the influence of seductions on every side, inviting us to sin; and the grace of God, inspiring us, urging us, and helping us to all that is good and virtuous. We are, therefore, under a double obligation: not to allow the evil tendencies of our human nature to lead us into an offense against God; and to show ourselves

[1] II Cor. 4[11]
[2] II Cor. 4[16]

faithful to the call of God, corresponding generously to his grace. To fulfil these obligations we must follow the law of progress.

If we are not to yield to our evil inclinations, we must combat them by positive acts; otherwise, like a man who, in a swift-flowing river, makes no effort to counteract the force of the current, we will be swept out into the sea of iniquity. Not to strive is to succumb; to strive is to advance.

To obey the inspirations of grace is to perform acts of virtue; and this is progress. St. Augustine and other masters of the spiritual life tell us that in the way of perfection it is impossible to remain stationary; we must either advance or go backward. *Qui non ascendit, descendit, et qui non proficit, deficit.*[1] We are greatly at fault if, under the pretext that we are not offending God, we fail to look to our progress and to strive for interior perfection. Thus are we led into relaxation, lukewarmness, and sometimes into sin.

[1] *De spiritu et anima*: chap. 52.

III. Acts and Resolutions

Dear Lord, is the law of progress the rule of my spiritual life? Do I, after the example of thy apostle, St. Paul, continually renew my efforts to grow in perfection? *Ad ea quae sunt priora extendens meipsum, ad destinatum persequor.*[1] If I compare my present dispositions with those in the past, can I say that I am now more humble, more self-sacrificing, more obedient, more charitable, more closely united to God, more recollected, more supernatural? Or must I, on the contrary, confess that my soul has been indifferent, perhaps in a sort of torpor? But I am receiving new graces every day, fresh inspirations, various helps to sanctification; in a word, I am urged to advance and develop the interior life of my soul.

My Jesus, by thy progress during thy mortal life, I ask of thee the grace to grow steadily in thy love and to develop within me that supernatural life which thou hast planted in my soul.

I resolve:

[1] Philip. 3[13]

1. From day to day to strive vigorously to develop or increase some particular virtue;

2. To take advantage of every occasion of offering some sacrifice to Christ;

3. From time to time, especially at the beginning of every month, to discover by self-examination whether I have made any progress in the spiritual life.

Doing the truth in charity, we may in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ.[1]

[1] EPHES. 4[15]

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